PEGEEN

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PEGEEN

BY

ELEANOR HOYT BRAINERD

AUTHOR OF "MISDEMEANOURS OF NANCY," ETC.

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TO

THE AUTHOR'S MOTHER

WHO LIKE PEGEEN HAS

THE NEIGHBOURING HEART

THIS BOOK IS LOVINGLY

DEDICATED

PEGEEN

I

PLEASE, sir, I've come to see to you," announced the Very Small Person.

John Archibald turned from his easel, eyed the intruder with amazement, faintly tinged with alarm, and thought of laughing—but did not laugh. She was such a mere wisp of a child and so profoundly serious.

"Oh, you have, have you?" the painter remarked feebly. There was a solemn determination about this invader of his privacy that made him uncomfortably sure she would do whatever she had come to do.

"Yes, sir, I'm Pegeen O'Neill. I'll begin in the kitchen. They say it's a sight."

She was taking off her battered straw hat and her wet coat and rubbers, and rolling up the sleeves of her clean but much patched gingham dress. The artist liked her better without the hat, though the extraordinary mass of black tumbled curls was too heavy a frame for the thin, sensitive, little face.

"I brought cleaning rags with me." The child had an oddly efficient air. One understood that she would always bring the needed things with her. "Men never have such things around. They're the wastingest creatures."

"Oh, but I do have rags around—often," protested Archibald, "only I'm usually wearing them."

The weak attempt to meet the situation lightly made no impression upon her seriousness.

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"Never mind. I'll keep you mended up now," she said, with an air of brisk capability.

"B-b-but," began the painter.

"You go right on with your painting," she advised kindly but firmly. "I won't want to come in here to-day, if that kitchen's anything like what they say it is, 'n' maybe it'll clear up by to-morrow so that you can paint outdoors and not be in my way. What time do you have dinner?"

He looked helplessly at the clock. Meals were always a movable feast with him. He had them when he chanced to think of them, when the light was poor, when the work went badly, when there happened to be something in the house to eat.

"Oh, all right," said the Very Small Person, quite as though he had explained all this aloud. "But I guess we'll have our dinner at half-past twelve. You just go right ahead until then and don't mind me."

She went into the kitchen and shut the door gently behind her.

That was how it began.

John Archibald had run away from New York—and from Nadine Ransome. The two had sapped his strength and dulled his spirit and blurred his vision. He loved them both—and, in much the same way, loved the beauty and the power and the indescribable, gripping charm of them; but the soul of him had run away from them before they had altogether had their way with it and had carried his fagged brain and struggling heart to a place where June was busy with a wonderful outdoor world.

There was a little shack on the edge of a wood, with a meadow dropping away from before the doorstep to join a quiet green valley that wandered narrowly between two lines of blue hills into dim, purple distances. He had camped there once, with

a fellow-artist, and, on a day when the city world was an ache in his brain and a bitterness in his heart, the winding, white ribbon of valley road and the upland meadow trail had called to him, the murmur of pine-top seas and the drip of fern-hidden springs and the silences of green woodland dusks, had promised peace.

So he ran away.

Running away may not be heroic, but at times it is exceedingly wise.

The shack and the land upon which it stood belonged to a colony of Shakers who lived across the Valley among the heaven-climbing hills, and they rented it willingly but with mild amazement.

"Thee doesn't intend to live in it?" asked the grey-clad eldress with the visioning eyes and the firm chin.

"When it rains," explained the tenant. "The rest of the time I'll live out of doors. I'm a painter."

"Oh, yea,—an artist!"

Her tones conveyed an understanding that unto artists all forms of lunacy were possible.

And so the man who had run away took possession of four rooms, a big stone fireplace, a rusty stove, a table, three rough chairs and a decrepit pine bureau. He made an expedition to a neighbouring town, bought a comfortable willow chair, some cushions and linen, a few dishes and cooking utensils, a broom, and a couch hammock. With the broom he made a clumsy, half-hearted, masculine attack upon the accumulated dirt of years. He hung the hammock in the living-room where it served in lieu of bed, knocked up some shelves for books, set an easel by the north window, built a fire on the hearth, pulled the willow chair up in front of it, lighted his pipe, and was at home—but not at peace. The place was haunted by ghosts he had brought with him. Beneath the night noises of wood and meadow he

heard the muffled throb and roar of city streets. In every corner lurked a shadowy face—an alluring, heart-breaking face, with lying promises in its eyes and lying smiles on its lips.

In the open, with the sun and wind and trees and sky for comrades, he could forget; but, when the violet dusk closed in and the friendly, green-gold world fell a-dreaming and lost itself in faint silver lights and creeping shadows, the old longing stirred, the old fight began again. It always ended by his flinging out into the night and tramping the roads and paths under the still stars or through the storm. It is hard to be strong within four walls.

He painted in a desultory way and he made friends with shy, wood creatures who finally accepted him as a harmless and well-meaning neighbour, and he fished a little and read a little and cooked a little and roamed the woods and fields a great deal, and June was kind to him in her bountiful, burgeoning way; but she worked no sudden cure. Nature does not hurry, even in her healing.

Yet, on the stormy morning when the Very Smal Person appeared at the shack John Archibald, standing before a window and watching the rain sweep down the Valley like a grey veil, through which the glooming hills peered, shadow-like and shivering, had admitted to himself that he was nearer in tune than he had been in many a day.

The silver flails of the rain, beating against the swaying young birches, made his fingers itch for a paint brush; the low-hung cloud masses tangled in the wind-tossed locks of the pines brought a smile to his lips; a clump of mountain laurel blurred to misty rose by the rain curtain set his memory groping for some half-forgotten melody. Yes: there was beauty in the world and he still had eyes for it, and there were worse things than a leaping fire on a hearth and a summer rain against the window panes.

He sat down before his easel and went to work with a whistled tune on his lips. After the Very Small Person had appeared and disappeared, he took up the work and the tune where he had left off; but when it occurred to him that he was whistling, he stopped abruptly. No man likes to admit to himself that he is convalescent from a heart malady he has believed fatal.

A particularly happy experiment with madder made him forget that he was a passion-racked soul and set him whistling gaily once more. The Very Small Person interrupted a carefully executed bit from *Rigoletto* when she came in from the kitchen, carrying a tray load much too big for her and went about setting the table.

Archibald looked up from his sketch, stared at her blankly, remembered, and laughed.

"Oh, yes," he said, whirling around on his chair and resting his arms on its back, "you are seeing to me."

"Yes, sir. Dinner'll be ready in a minute. I couldn't find a tablecloth, so I took a paper napkin. S'pose you use them to get out of washing, don't you?"

"I do," acknowledged the painter. "What—if it isn't intrusive to ask—are we going to have for dinner?"

"Well, bread 'n' milk was all you had in the house; but I'd sort of figured it would be that way, so I stopped at Mrs Neal's on my way up. I knew you got your butter 'n' eggs 'n' milk there, 'n' I told her you needed eggs 'n' butter, 'n' then, while I was there, I got a slice of ham—their hams are fine —'n' some fresh pot cheese 'n' a jar of preserves. Mrs Neal says she'll be glad to let us have anything she can spare. I told her to save us a chicken for Sunday. She was real interested about my doing your work."

"It *is* interesting," agreed Archibald.

"Yessir. She said the folks along the Valley were just downright troubled about your living so dirty 'n' accidental when anybody could see you were used to having things proper. They'd all come up and looked in through the windows when you were away, so they knew how things were. Course they understood about you being an artist 'n' that that was why, but Mrs Neal said she'd feel a heap more comfortable, knowing I was seeing to you."

"I believe I'll feel more comfortable, myself, after I get over the first shock," confessed the artist, eyeing with approval the ham and eggs which had just been put upon the table; "but may I ask how you came to undertake seeing to me?"

"Why, I don't know. I heard folks talking about how shiftless and helpless you were 'n' that kind of bothered me; 'n' then she said yesterday: 'Pegeen, why don't you go and take care of that ridikilus orphan up in the shack?' 'N' I said: 'Why, I don't know.' 'N' she said: 'You need somebody to take care of, 'n' he certainly needs somebody to take care of him, 'n' it looks to me like a good combination.' 'N' I said: 'Well, I guess I will.' So I came, to-day.

"She said she was sure we'd get along finely together. She's seen you somewhere; 'n' she said you looked unhappy and neglected but sort of nice, 'n' as if you'd be a credit to me, after a while."

"Optimistic soul," laughed Archibald. "Who is She?"

The Very Small Person started for the kitchen after another cup of coffee.

"Why, she's the Smiling Lady," she called back across her shoulder, as she went.

The words were left hanging on the air, and the little room seemed the brighter for them. Archibald said them over to himself softly

"The Smiling Lady!" Had another Mona Lisa come to light in this Peaceful Valley?

"Pegeen," he asked as the small girl came with his coffee, "who *is* the Smiling Lady?"

She set the full cup down carefully.

"Oh, that's just a name for her," she explained. "I made it for her when she first came, 'n' it fitted her so well that the others took it up, 'n' now she's the Smiling Lady all up 'n' down the Valley; but her other name's Moran."

"And does she smile prettily, Peggy?"

"It just melts the heart out of you, sir, it does—but she isn't always smiling, you know—not with her lips. It's a sort of a smile that goes with her like the words to a tune. 'N' her hair's all bright 'n' ripply 'n' smiley, 'n' she walks so light, 'n' she just has a way with her. When she comes into a room you feel as if birds had begun singing there."

Archibald leaned back in his chair and looked at the slip of a girl, with the thin, expressive face in which now adoration glowed warmly.

"Pegeen," he said, with conviction, "when you aren't taking care of somebody, you write poetry?"

She looked bewildered.

"No, sir. I haven't ever. I couldn't."

"Well, there's the making of a poet in you. Did you say the Smiling Lady's name was Mrs Moran?"

His voice held a tint of anxiety.

"Miss Moran, it is. She isn't married."

"That's better, much better. Peggy, my child, I like the way you take care of me."

And that night the ghosts forgot to walk.

II

ARCHIBALD wakened, sniffed incredulously, sat up in his hammock bed, and sniffed again. Yes, it certainly was coffee—good coffee, and there was a subdued rustle and stir beyond the door leading into the kitchen.

Why, of course! He was being "seen to." Pegeen had come back.

He had not really expected her, but he might have known she was not one to put her hand to the plough and look back.

Incidentally it might be well for him to arise and shine. The Young Person who had adopted him had intimated that, if the weather cleared overnight, he would be expected to paint out of doors and let her clean his quarters. When she got ready to clean she would probably clean, and he must breakfast and make his escape.

Queer how mad women, even very small women, were about cleaning things. No man could stand against them when the sacred rage possessed them. He would not think of attempting it. No more comfortable and unashamed grubbiness. He was going to be kept clean, whether he would or no. He had seen it in the gleam of Peggy's eye. When she saw to people, she saw to them.

There was a whimsical smile on the face the man turned toward the kitchen, but his eyes were very kind. On the whole, he was rather glad he had been taken in hand. He liked the Very Small Person and there was something pleasant about awakening to an aroma of coffee and a smell of toast.

He made a hasty toilet and looked into the kitchen.

"You ready?" said Pegeen, briskly. "I forgot to ask you last night when you wanted breakfast, so I just decided to have it at eight. I'd have called you, only I heard you moving around. How d'you like your boiled eggs?"

"I have a theory that I like them cooked two minutes," said Archibald, humbly, "but I've never been able to get them that way."

"Well, you'll get them now. She likes hers coddled."

"Oh, does she?"

"Yessir. I'd love to coddle you some."

"I've an idea you'll coddle me a great deal."

Pegeen laughed.

"That's just the way she twists things. I didn't know anybody else did. It makes talking lots more fun, don't it? Most people talk right straight ahead about sensible things, and you'd as lief they'd stop any time. I like it when sometimes you say what you don't mean or don't say what you mean—not lies, you know, but all twisty, like a guessing game—'n' then I like the things that don't mean things—just sound as if they did—snarks and goober snatches and such, you know.

"She read me lots of those when I had measles. Measles was the best time I've ever had. I went and had them right at her house when I was staying there over Sunday once."

She flew into the other room, set the table, and came back for the coffee and toast.

"Now you sit down 'n' I'll cook that two-minute egg. We'll have to fix a bed for you in the little room where you've got your trunk, so I can come in here and have the table all ready soon as I get here mornings. It's kind of messy anyway, sleeping in your dining-room. It'd be nice if you could afford another hammock for your bedroom. This one helps to furnish here."

"I'll send for another," said the man who was being seen to.

He got his two-minute egg, and the coffee was delicious, and the toast was crisp and browned and hot as the toast one sees in hungry dreams.

While he ate, Pegeen went out and came back with her hands full of maidenhair fern.

"You might send for some vases when you're ordering the hammock," she said happily, as she put the ferns in a glass of water and set them on the table. "She says it's wicked to let a room starve for flowers and green things when you can't walk a step outdoors without finding something that would put heart into the very lonesomest, saddest room. I always did like flowers, but I never realised about ferns and green things till she showed me, 'n' now I like them most better 'n' flowers. They're so cool, 'n' fresh, 'n' kind of resting. There's always flowers or ferns or pine branches or bayberry or something in her rooms. I guess that's why, even when she isn't in them, they all seem kind of as if she must have just gone through them, smiling in her eyes, the way she does. Is that egg all right?"

"Perfect. She must be rather a wonderful Smiling Lady. Where does she live?"

"Right down the other side of Pine Knob. You can go over or around, but it's prettiest over. There's a spring up on top with pine-trees around it and a place where you can look way out 'n' out 'n' out. She goes up there sometimes to watch the sunset. My, but she does love things."

"And people?" questioned Archibald, idly.

"Well, I should say! She's the lovingest thing. Sometimes I think the Loving Lady'd be a better name than the Smiling Lady, but I guess it's all the same thing. Loving makes smiling, don't it?"

"Not always," said the man. His voice rang hard, and Pegeen shot a swift, surprised look at him.

"Well, it ought to," she said soberly. "That's what it's really for—except when people you love get sick or die—or are bad. 'N' if they're bad that's because they aren't loving. She says if you love hard enough you just naturally make the world smiley—only you have to be sure it's the real, right love, the kind of love God has. She's the funniest thing. She talks about God right out, as if He were folks, 'n' as if He and she had beautiful times together—like my measles. 'N' she don't go to church so awfully much either, 'n' once I saw her sew on Sunday. That was when they were trying to get some clothes ready for the Johnston twins that came unexpected. I asked her how she was going to fix *that* with God—my mother was a Presbyterian—'n' she laughed 'n' said she didn't have to fix it, 'cause sewing in His name was just as good as praying in His name, 'n' loving was a bigger commandment'n that one about not doing any work, 'n' those twins surely would need loving, with their mother having no backbone 'n' their father having delirious tremors.

"It's nice out of doors now, 'n' as soon as I wash dishes I'm going to begin cleaning."

"I'm off," laughed Archibald.

"It'll be over before dinner 'n' I'll only do it thorough once a week," she called after him encouragingly, as he went away down the sunlit slope where the daisies made way for him.

Mrs Neal, his nearest neighbour, who was working in her garden as he skirted her side yard, dropped her trowel and strolled over to the fence when she saw him coming.

She was a sociable woman. He had discovered that before and resented it. Above all things in the world he had wanted to escape from people, to be left alone with his bruised soul; but, oddly enough, he was not conscious of bruises this morning, was not

even conscious of a soul, which is quite as things should be on a June morning.

And so, to the waiting woman's surprise, he took his pipe from his mouth, bade her a blithe good-morning, rested his elbows comfortably on the top rail of the fence beside her own, and smiled into her broad, astonished and kindly face.

"My land," said the woman. "Was it as bad as all that?"

"It was," admitted the man.

"And here I was thinking it was a bad disposition. Just goes to show that you never can tell."

Mrs Neal's tone was self-reproachful. Her face had taken on creases still more kindly.

"I told Peggy she'd got her work cut out for her; but she said if you was grouchy you needed seein' to all the more, and that bein' grouchy was, like as not, just not bein' used to bein' pleasant; but I didn't suppose she'd get you used to being pleasant as quick as this."

Archibald's grin held no hurt vanity. He had evidently made an uncommonly bad first impression, but his neighbour was plainly ready and willing to reverse her judgment.

"And here all the time you was only lonesome," Mrs Neal went on, in her fat, friendly voice. "Well, Pegeen surely is quite a kid. Now, ain't she?"

"She is," agreed the man emphatically. "Tell me about her."

The woman draped her bulk more comfortably over the fence, as one who settles herself for a long social session. She always had time to visit, and next to the sound of her own voice, she loved best the sound of another person's voice, yet she managed to accomplish an astonishing amount of work between talks.

"Well," she began, her eyes looking past the listening man and down the winding road, "Peggy

wasn't born here. She came along one day on a broken-down cart behind a broken-down horse. A baby thing she was, only five years old, but she was taking care of folks already. I saw 'em as they went by here and the youngster was pulling a shawl up tight around her mother's throat and shoulders. Broken down worse'n the cart and horse, the woman was. I never saw anybody more peaked and sad. Why, say, that woman's eyes made you *ache*—except when they looked at Peggy. I don't know but what they made you ache worse than ever then. The little smile that came into them looked so sort of pitiful in that face of hers. You know the kind of face—the kind that's been pretty once and fine, but has had the youth and prettiness and fineness all killed out of it. A face that's sort of a tombstone telling where everything worth while in a life has been buried. She'd been clear outside her husband's class. It was easy to tell that. Land knows how she ever came to marry him. Common, drunken brute he was. Might have been handsome in a beefy sort of a way once, but drink had knocked that out of him, along with any other decency he might have had. Honest to God, if I'd 'a' been a man I'd 'a' started every day by going down the road and licking that man O'Neill, just for luck; but his wife wouldn't have thanked me for it—nor Peg either. The woman didn't love him, but she had some queer idea of duty or pluck or something hidden away in her, and she never complained and never let any one say hard things about him to her—just hid what she could, and endured what she couldn't hide.

"I figured it that she'd run away and married a handsome, blarneying, good-for-nothing Irishman against her family's wishes and in the face of all sorts of prophecies about the evil that'd come of it, and seeing as she'd made her bed she was going

to lie on it without whining. I'll bet her folks never knew how things went with her.

"She tried to teach Peggy what she could and the youngster was a good deal like her in some ways—tidy, little mite with pretty ideas about things and lots of pluck. She ain't a whiner, no more'n her mother, but it ain't all plain pluck with Peg. She's got just the one good thing that her father had to give her, 'n' that's cheerfulness. She's got a disposition like one of them toy balloons, Peg has, and it's a good thing. If it hadn't been for that she'd 'a' been dead, with all the responsibility and want and abuse she's had to stand.

"She's too old for her years, of course, and she's got serious ways and some awfully grown-up thoughts, but she'll never die of broken heart and broken spirit like her mother did. No, sir. You can't down Peg. That's the Irish in her. She'd see something cheerful and encouraging in a small-pox epidemic—'n' she'd be out nursing the sick ones too. Well, there's no telling what the man was himself before the drink got him. He was something a fine-souled, big-hearted woman fell in love with, and maybe a better father might have given Peggy something that wasn't as handy to have around as her cheerfulness."

"What became of the mother?" Archibald asked. There was a very friendly light in his eyes as he looked into the face beside him. He was going to like this neighbour.

"Oh, she dragged around, getting weaker and weaker and thinner and thinner and whiter and whiter. I'll say one thing for O'Neill. He never beat her—not even when he was drunk. He didn't make a living for her and he didn't raise a hand to help her, the lazy whelp. Chopped her own wood, she did, when Peggy didn't pick it up in the woods. The neighbours would have helped but they couldn't

do much—didn't dare. She was so proud she'd rather starve than take charity. You couldn't even offer it—just had to do what you could in a round-about, happen-so way.

"By and by she took to her bed and then Peggy had to do everything that got done. She surely was a wonder too—waited on her mother hand and foot, and kept things clean and cooked whenever there was anything to cook, and got wood to keep them all warm, and looked after O'Neill as if he was a bad child that she loved even if he was bad.

"Then her mother died about a year ago. That did for O'Neill. He'd been a brute to the woman, but then he'd been a brute to himself. The drink did it, and some place back in his rotten old soul I guess there was a clean spot that loved her. He was too drunk to see her buried and he kept that way most of the time for two or three months. Lord knows where he got the money for his whisky. Peggy used to help around at the neighbours, taking care of babies mostly. She's a wonderful hand with babies. Some of the folks offered to take her on and look out for her, but she wouldn't leave her father, and what little she made she'd use to feed him—washed for him, too, and tried to keep his clothes mended. Her mother had taught her to read and write and spell, and she went to school sometimes when she could. O'Neill'd be off for two or three days at a time and then she'd slip down to the schoolhouse. Miss Keyes, the teacher, says Peg's the smartest scholar she ever had."

"Couldn't some one interfere legally and take her away from her father?" asked Archibald.

Mrs Neal smiled indulgently.

"You don't really know Peg yet," she said. "We all worried a great deal and did what we could to help the child, but as for taking her away from what she thought was her duty—from somebody that

was dependent on her—well, you wait till you know Pegeen O'Neill.

"O'Neill, he settled the business himself by going off on one of his sprees and not coming back at all. The Lord knows what became of him. I hope he's dead and I guess he is, but his mind had sort of been going for a while before he left and Peggy, she has an idea that he just lost his memory and didn't know where he belonged, or else he'd have come home to her.

"Grieved for him—that youngster did. Not exactly about her being without him, but about his being without her. She was afraid he was somewhere crazy and wasn't being seen to properly.

"Several of us offered to take her in, after that, but what'd she do but go over to Mrs Potter's. She was sick—Mrs Potter I mean—and had a little baby, and her husband's work took him away most of the time. Poison poor, they were too. Peg she said they sort of needed her and she'd got the habit of taking care of somebody; so she took on that job until Mrs Potter died. Then she took care of the baby until its mother's folks came and got it last month. Peg felt real bad about the baby, but Mrs Benderby's husband had died in the winter and she was all alone and walking down to the village, three miles, early every morning to get day's work and walking home, dog tired, at night; so Peg she said she'd just move over and see to Mrs Benderby. Gets up and has fire and breakfast at half-past six for the woman and tidies up the house and mends and has a supper waiting for the poor soul when she comes in at night. That didn't keep the child busy though; so she took you on."

"Good heavens!" protested the man. "It's too much for her."

"No, it ain't"—Mrs Neal's smile was reassuring. "It's just a lark for her at your place and she'll

have good food up there and make a little money, and she can fix Mrs Benderby up, night and morning, all the same. Peg's got to take care of something with all her might and it may as well be you and Mrs Benderby."

"Well, perhaps it may," agreed Mrs Benderby's fellow beneficiary, humbly.

After that there was a little talk of June peas and lettuce and the vicious propensities of cut worms; and then Mrs Neal went back to her gardening, while Archibald swung himself over a stone wall into the road, over another wall into a clover field, and made his leisurely way toward the most sketchable of willow-fringed brooks.

For a while he made pretence of working, but even the brook laughed at the faint-heartedness of his efforts and the drooping willow boughs quivered with mirth and the sunlight stealing through the green leaves danced over his canvas and mocked at its futility.

"Work? In June?" sang a bird in the willows and, at the idea, all the summer world laughed with the brook.

"Smell!" whispered the clover sea, billowing away from the tree shadows where he sat.

"Feel!" crooned the breeze, touching his cheek with cool, caressing fingers.

"Look!" shouted the sun, driving shadow-throwing clouds across the low meadowland and up the far blue hills.

"Listen!" lilted the bird in the branches.

Archibald gave up the struggle. Why dabble with paints? Loafing was more glorious business.

"You're quite right about it," he said cheerfully to the derisive brook. "I'm a punk painter, but the Lord knew his business when he sketched in June. Come along and show me more of the canvas."

He set off across the meadow, the brook chuckling

its sunlit way beside him and together they wandered down the Valley. A companionable brook it was, full of surprises and whimsies as a woman, running quietly through brown, sun-warmed shallows, working itself into a fury against solid, unyielding stones, dreaming under overhanging elders, glooming among thick clustering pine-trees, dashing noisily, recklessly, down steep slopes.

Winding and wandering, it led its comrade around the base of Pine Knob, into a bird-enchanted woodland and whirling suddenly around a sharp corner, swooped out into an open, birch-fringed glade where a host of quaker ladies powdered the grass and buttercups made love to them brazenly.

"There!" shouted the brook, leaping a mossy stone for sheer love of splashing, and making rainbows in the sunlight. "What do you think of June now?" With a gurgle of glee it romped away through the birches, but Archibald stayed in the glade.

A girl was sitting among the quaker ladies. Her hair was full of golden lights. Her eyes were full of laughter. Her lap was full of flowers and puppies and kittens. A big collie dog stood sentinel at her shoulder. At her feet on the grass, two fat babies rolled about in a riotous tussle with a puppy, strayed from the lapful.

A twig cracked under the man's foot. The dog growled warningly and the girl, glancing round, saw the intruder standing among the birches.

Apparently she was not startled, and she was as little embarrassed.

"Don't pay any attention to him. It's principle with him, not passion," she said, laying a quieting hand on the dog's head.

Archibald and she might have been meeting every day for months. Not a hint of self-consciousness ruffled her gay serenity. She made no effort to rise

—merely sat there in the sunshine with young life rioting over her and round her and smiled up at the stranger out of clear, fearless, brown eyes that were used to greeting friends. There was no room for doubt. This was Pegeen's Smiling Lady.

Archibald's cap was in his hand. Apology was on his lips, but looking down at the group, he laughed instead of apologising. Babies, puppies, kittens—all were staring at him solemnly, uncertainly. The collie was staring, too, with more dignity and with deeper suspicion.

Only the Smiling Lady accepted him without reserve, had no doubts about him.

"We came after flowers," she said. "At least we intended to get flowers, but there were so many of us, and some of us had such short legs, and all of us except Sandy had such vagabond, inconsequent souls, that we just sat down and rolled around in flowers instead of picking them."

"I've been sketching. At least I intended to sketch," Archibald paraphrased.

She laughed. The laugh was as satisfactory in its way as the smile.

"Yes, it's that kind of a day," she admitted lazily.

She moved a wandering puppy and a kitten or two, to make room for the man on the grassy bank beside her, but there was no coquetry in the invitation—merely a matter-of-fact acceptance of another companion less reliable than the collie perhaps, less amusing than the puppies and kittens and babies, but doubtless well meaning. There was June joy enough for all comers, and she was no monopolist. And when Archibald had stretched himself out on his back beside her, she evidently considered her responsibility ended, took his well being and content for granted, and went back to playing with her young things. The young things, after their first

surprise, accepted him in much the same tranquil way. Only Sandy, the collie, maintained a haughty aloofness, stood manifestly on guard.

One of the kittens made a tentative excursion along the man's recumbent form and curled up in a soft ball on his chest. A puppy of inquiring and friendly turn of mind chewed two or three of the newcomer's fingers in turn, then gambolled awkwardly up to his head and licked his cheek with a warm, wet tongue. A chubby, laughing baby in sadly faded and much patched blue rompers filled her hot little hands with quaker ladies and scattered them painstakingly over the front of the artist's flannel shirt.

"Thank you, Ophelia," murmured Archibald. "Or perhaps I should say Hamlet," he added doubtfully.

The Smiling Lady rescued a kitten from the strangle hold of the other diminutive being in blue rompers, and cleared up the situation.

"There's simply no telling in rompers," she said. "But that's Rosamond strewing flowers over you and this is Jeremiah. They're the Johnston twins, four years old and very active, thank you. Father Johnston is religious and Mother Johnston is romantic and each one named a baby, but I do think Mr Johnston might have picked out one of the cheerful prophets. Jerry isn't a bit of a wailer. Jerry and Rosy aren't such bad little names for them, though, are they?"

"Very good little names," protested Archibald. "But how do you know which child belongs to which name?"

"You have to go by manners, not by looks," the Smiling Lady explained. "Now if Jerry's attention had been concentrated upon you, he wouldn't have strewn flowers over you. He'd probably have bitten your thumb or poked a finger in

your eye. You see, Jerry's on the way to being a man."

"A thumb-biting, eye-poking class, I gather?"

"Forceful, let us put it—and yet so helpless, poor things! How is Pegeen?"

"The connection is obvious," Archibald confessed. "I am wax in her hands. Within a week there won't be a paint brush in the shack that I can call my own. She's going to keep me tidy if she has to drive me from home in order to do it. In fact, she did drive me from home this morning. She's cleaning."

"She'll take very good care of you," said the Smiling Lady, "and *how she will* love doing it! She'll mother you as if you were Jerry's age. Peggy was born for mothering."

She had risen as she spoke.

"Sandy and I must take all these babies home before they begin clamouring for food," she said lightly, "and I haven't a doubt but that Peggy is watching the meadow path for you. Give her my love."

She took it for granted that he knew her as she knew him. Pegeen was sure to have talked of her and so why bother with formalities? Yet, in spite of her frank acceptance of him, Archibald did not offer to walk home with her.

There was a definite finality about her leave-taking, a door quietly shut. Evidently this unconventional Young Woman made her own laws and limitations and Archibald, being no dullard in feminine psychology, realised that the man who presumed upon her casual friendliness would be likely to find the door permanently closed. So he stood quietly and watched her going away across the sunshiny glade.

She walked as she spoke, as she looked, as she smiled, with a fine freedom, a blithe assurance; and

though the figure that swayed so lightly as it went away between the birches was girlishly slender, there was a subtle hint of strength and vigour in its flowing lines.

As Archibald looked, she stooped to one of the babies, and the man drew a sharp breath of appreciation, noting with an artist's eye the gracious curves of her breast under the clinging muslin blouse, the rhythmic length of limb, the modelling of the bare forearms, the well-set head.

When she gathered the child into her arms, tossed it high before cuddling it close against her shoulder, and went on her way as swiftly and lightly as though unburdened, the watcher sighed with satisfaction.

He was still thinking of her as he leaped the wall into his own meadow and swung his cap over his head, in answer to the greeting waved to him by a little figure in the doorway of the shack.

"Not so much beautiful," he summed up, "as made up of beauties. She'd never drive a man mad, but, holy smoke, what a delight she might be to him in his sane moments!"

III

"PEGGY," said John Archibald, leaning his elbows on the breakfast-table, "sit down and let me talk to you."

The girl who was headed toward the kitchen turned back promptly and sat down across the table from him.

Then she waited tranquilly for him to talk to her. What he had to say might be unimportant. It usually was, but she liked his talk. As she had already explained to the Smiling Lady, it was "so sort of foolish and snarky."

To-day, however, he seemed inclined to seriousness.

"We've got to put things on a business basis, child," he said firmly.

"Yes, sir"—Pegeen's tone was docile but vastly indifferent.

"You've been seeing to me for a week now and you know the worst about me. Now the question is, whether you are going to take the job for the summer."

The dark blue Irish eyes under Peg's black lashes flooded with anxiety.

"Don't I suit, sir?" she asked.

"You suit like an easy shoe, Peggy; but do I?"

The thin, freckled little face blazed into enthusiasm.

"Why, I think you're splendid, sir—just splendid. Funny, you know, and messy, but I don't mind that. I love cleaning up after folks if they're nice, and you're as nice as can be."

"Thank you," said Archibald, gratefully. "Then you think you can keep on seeing to me?"

"Yessir. I'd love it."

"And the work isn't too hard?"

"Hard? Why, it isn't a bit hard. If anybody isn't sick or drunk or anything like that, seeing to him is as easy as anything."

"I'm feeling fairly healthy"—Archibald's voice was grave—"and I'll try not to get drunk."

"Oh, well, then we'll get along fine, sir. Of course I'd do my best, even if you did get sick or drunk, but it's lots harder."

"I should think it might be. Now the next thing to be settled is, what your wages are to be."

"Oh, I wouldn't expect wages—not real wages you know. Just enough to get me some shoes and some aprons. I'd like some big clean-looking aprons that would hide my dresses. My dresses aren't so very nice you know, but they'd do under aprons."

"Miss O'Neill"—Archibald shook a forefinger at her sternly—"I won't allow anyone to see to me without paying her real wages. I couldn't be funny and messy with any comfort at all unless there was a wage-earner to clean up after me. Now I don't know how wages go in this Valley, but what would you say to five dollars a week?"

Pegeen stared at him in blank amazement. Then a pitying expression blotted out the surprise.

"You certainly do need seeing to," she said gently, in the tone of one humouring the harmless insane. "Why, you can get real hired help for five dollars; but, then, a man wouldn't know."

"I've got more than hired help. I've got somebody who does all the work. I've got a cook and a housekeeper and a valet and a companion. Now, for the services of four experts I don't consider five dollars an exorbitant wage. So that's settled."

The vivid little face across the table was flushed, excited. It occurred to the man that if the thin cheeks should take on plumpness and the sharp

little chin should fill out to rounded curves, and the unchildish, anxious look should quite die out of the great eyes, Pegeen might some day be amazingly pretty. Even as it was, there was an appealing charm about her.

"What'll I ever do with all that money?" she asked breathlessly.

"Buy a coach and four with it," advised Archibald.

Her imagination was all aflame at the suggestion.

"Black horses and the coach lined with yellow, and we'll take Miss Moran and the Johnston twins and Mrs Neal and Mrs Benderby and Jimmy Dawes, and the McKenzie baby and—— How many does a coach hold?"

"Well, unless it's a very large coach, I should say you've got it about full."

"All right. Can you drive?"

"I can."

"Then you'll sit on the front seat with Miss Moran."

"Hooray!"

"And the rest of us will be behind with red and green umbrellas, and there'll be chains that jingle on the horses and Jimmy Dawes will blow a horn —I saw a coach go by down the road once. It was perfectly splendid. Now there isn't anything but automobiles.

"Maybe you'd rather buy an automobile."

She laughed happily.

"No, I'd as lief have a sawmill as one of them. An automobile wouldn't fit into a fairy story, now would it?"

Archibald visibly made an effort to fit one in and, failing, shook his head despairingly.

"There, I told you. We've got to have the coach."

The sensitive face was lighted from brow to chin with merriment.

Yes. She unquestionably would be pretty. She was pretty even now.

"Oh, you *are* nice," she sighed happily.

The man reached across the table and clasped the thin little hands in his.

It was good to give happiness—almost better than being happy. Maybe it was the same thing.

"Before we get the coach and four," he said, "we'll hire Mrs Neal's horse and buggy and drive to Pittsfield and when we get there we will buy those shoes and aprons and some dresses to go under the aprons and a hat——"

"With roses on it," chanted Pegeen.

"With roses on it," agreed Archibald.

"And a raincoat for rainy mornings—and stockings —and all sorts of things," he ended vaguely.

"But they aren't to come out of the coach money," he added hastily. "Not a bit of it. They are extra. You are going to have five dollars a week and 'found.' 'Found' means hats with roses on them."

Peg's chin was nestled between her palms. Her eyes were beaming on him. Suddenly a cloud swept over them.

"If you please, sir," she began and hesitated. The cloud of anxiety had drifted over the whole piquant face.

"If you please, sir," she began again.

"Yes?" encouraged the man across the table.

"Are you sure you can afford it, sir?" It came with a rush at last—"I've always heard that artists —I don't really need the things. I've got plenty. I can get along first rate with just the shoes and aprons."

Through Archibald's mind drifted a fleeting memory of the last gift he had sent to Nadine Ransome. She loved emeralds and many men had given them to her. A dull flush came into his cheeks.

"I'm quite sure I can afford it. You see I had a father who didn't paint pictures."

"Oh, well, then—" said Peggy, understandingly.

"We'll go to Pittsfield on Saturday."

"Pink roses," stipulated the small girl, as she carried the breakfast dishes kitchenward.

"Big pink roses," amended the man.

For a few days after his high-handed adjustment of the wage problem, Archibald painted with something like his old-time fervour. For two years eye and hand and brain had been out of tune; but now the beauty of the world cried out to him again and his brush caught and fixed the meaning of the cry. Men had prophesied great things for him—men who knew. He had believed in great things for himself; but all that had been in the time he could scarcely remember—in the time before he had met Nadine. Since then he had lost faith in himself and in much beside; but now, standing before a finished picture and knowing it was good, the painter admitted to himself that life had its satisfactory moments. Not that he was sure of himself. He was far from it; but agreeable things *did* happen. There was Pegeen and there was the Smiling Lady and there was June—and he had painted a good picture.

"Peggy," he said, as the girl passed him on her way to the spring, "God must have had a mighty contented, comfortable feeling at the end of the sixth day."

"Yessir." She had no idea what he meant, but it was enough for her that he said a thing. She was willing to swear to it.

He put an affectionate hand upon her shoulder as she came and stood beside him looking at the picture.

"I understand you're a wonderful hand with babies, Peg," he said. "What do you do with a baby when he's cross or bad or wants something he mustn't have? Spank him, eh?"

Pegeen flushed indignantly.

"Well, I should think not! If that's all you know about babies! Why, I just go to work and get the poor thing awfully interested in something else."

Archibald laughed boyishly.

"Peggy child. That must be the answer. You're getting me awfully interested in something else."

"Only you weren't bad, sir," protested the small girl, loyally.

A shadow crept over the man's face.

"Bad enough, Peg—but I might have been worse."

"Well, you're good enough for me," said Peggy, contentedly.

The comforting words rang pleasantly in his ears a half hour later when he plunged into the woods behind the shack and took the trail leading up the steep slope of Pine Knob hill.

The day had been hot for June and the dim cool greenness closed around him deliciously as he made his way through depths of hemlock shadow and gold-flecked shallows of birch-filtered light. There was a faint stir of wind in the branches, a rustle of light foot and lighter wing in the hidden places of bough and undergrowth.

Now and then, as he climbed, he caught, through openings among the trees, sudden glimpses of the Valley where the long shadows of late afternoon were flinging themselves across the sunlit breast of the meadow land, and of the range of hills beyond, still gold and green and blue, but with prophetic splashes of deepening purple creeping in and out among the ravines and hollows.

He would be in time to see the sunset from the top of Pine Knob and, at the thought, something Pegeen had said days before flashed into his mind. There was "a place up there where you could look out and

out," and the Smiling Lady often went there to watch the sunset.

Archibald told himself that it would be a pleasant thing to find her there. She was the sort of woman with whom one could watch a miracle.

And so when, pushing aside a screen of thick crowding leaves, he found her sitting on a mossy stone, elbow on knee, chin in hand, eyes a-dream, he was not surprised, only glad that the human note could intrude on Nature's melody without discord. She fitted in.

"You're just in time," she said, looking up at him for an instant in friendly fashion. Then her eyes went back to the fields and hills and sky.

She had a curious way of making one feel welcome without bothering to put the thing into words. Archibald remembered that it had been the same when he had found her in the birch wood. There had been the same undisturbed acceptance of his coming, the same companionable assumption of his content. There was no aloofness about her mood. Before she had been absorbed in frolicking with babies. Now she was absorbed in the sunset. She took his interest in the babies and in the sunset for granted, shared them with him, and felt that she had fulfilled her duty. There was something oddly intimate about such a welcome. Archibald puzzled over it, as he dropped on the moss beside her and ostensibly gave his undivided attention to the sunset. If she had been startled or formal or coquettish or resentful—those were the beginnings of acquaintance between a man and a woman; but this girl's life and his might have been running side by side for years. All the futile, tentative things might have been said so long ago that they could be forgotten. There was suggestion of a long lane traversed, of barriers passed, about this taking-for-granted companioning. And yet the splendid

simplicity of it put a man in his place, made him feel humbly grateful, eager to be found worthy. He wondered whether she met all strangers in the same way.

As though she had heard his thoughts, the girl turned to him for a moment, looked at him frankly, appraisingly.

"One knows that you won't spoil it," she said, the ripple of light that was like the soul of a smile running over her face.

So that was it? Archibald felt enormously flattered. To be recognised at sight by a girl with a smile like that as the sort of man who would not spoil beautiful things, seemed exceedingly worth while. To be good enough for Pegeen and to be understanding enough for the Smiling Lady—honours were coming thick and fast upon him.

And then he justified the girl's faith in him by quite forgetting her in the glory of the sunset world. There was no mad riot of crimson and gold in the west. Above the tops of the crouching hills masses of rose-lined clouds with flame at their hearts melted into opal as they dared the sky heights. Bars of palest turquoise gathered the opaline blues to themselves; and, higher still, the faint green faded from the blue, leaving an eastern sea of pale pure azure through which a silver crescent drifted, tangled in foam spume of delicate pink cloud.

Gradually the colour died away. The young moon dropped behind the eastern hills. Ashen greys and violets and liquid, indefinite, blue-blacks claimed the world.

The Smiling Lady stirred and rose. Archibald joined her and together they went silently down the sweet, scented ways of the dew-wet dusk.

"You'll come in?" she said when they reached a small white farmhouse nestled under great maples. He followed her into a candle-lighted room where Sandy, the collie, and an elderly woman with a

shrewd, homely face rose from before the open fire to greet them.

"Mr Archibald will be having tea with me, Ellen," said the Smiling Lady, quite as though having tea with her were a life-long habit of the man's.

Ellen took one swift, comprehensive look at the visitor as she carried the girl's coat from the room. The respectful look of a well-trained servant it was, yet Archibald had a feeling that he had been catalogued and the record tucked away in a card index.

"Ellen plays the rôle of a dragon," Miss Moran explained lightly; "a non-sulphurous dragon. It seems the most independent young woman must offer up concessions to tradition in the form of a dragon —and then I couldn't get along without Ellen. She was my nurse once upon a time; my mother's housekeeper afterward. She would not go away with the others—will never go away until she makes the long journey. Money has nothing to do with such service as she gives me. We share what I have and she's family and friend and servant all in one."

"You are fortunate to have her," the man said gently. She nodded. For an instant there was no hint of a smile in her face and Archibald felt as though the candles in the room had suddenly burned out.

"She's the only one now.'

There was a hurt in her voice, but the next moment she was calling gaily through the half-open door to Ellen.

"Jam, Ellen! Plum jam, with the scones—plenty of it—and in here, please."

And when Ellen had moved a wicker table to a place before the fire, covered it with the whitest of cloths and set upon it a tray on which a teapot steamed merrily and a salad nestled temptingly among

cresses and a covered muffin dish made promises and the plum jam glowed colourfully, the girl in the big wicker chair across the table from Archibald was all cheerfulness.

"Peggy gives you dinners perhaps?" she queried. "Women-folk fall into picnicking ways when there are no men about the house to be considered, and I never let meals interfere with sunsets, so I have my tea whenever I come in. Of course we don't really need an open fire to-night, but I love it so and, thank Heaven, even the summer nights are usually cold enough for it, so I sit here in the evenings and sip and munch and tell over the day's doings—and, once in a while, I send a pitying thought toward all the folk who are eating dinners in rose-and-gilt city restaurants."

"Poor wretches," murmured Archibald, sinking back luxuriously among his cushions and looking around him at the low-ceilinged room with its gay chintz and wicker and old mahogany, its companioning books and pictures, its great bowls of June flowers and greenery. A friendly room.

His eyes came back to the mistress of it, and rested there contentedly.

She was busying herself with the tea and he had always liked to watch a pretty woman pouring tea. Not that this woman was pretty. He discarded the word fastidiously. She was something better than pretty, something much more satisfying. Candle-light and fire-light touched the waves of her thick rippling hair to something like burnished copper, but it was deeply auburn in its shadows. Sun and wind had had their way with her clear skin, had tanned it, had even freckled it—but tenderly, mellowing white to cream, rose flush to ripened peach, splashing a nose far from classic with the faintest of brown touches, melting almost invisibly into the sun-warmed tan.

Her mouth was over-large by artist's canons, but

sweetness lurked in its curves and the generous mobile lips were warmly red. And her eyes—Archibald puzzled vainly over their colour. Hazel he had thought them at first sight, but as they looked at him across the tea cups they looked deeply grey—or were they violet in their shadows?

"My friends—the people who *were* my friends in my rose-and-gilt restaurant days—think I am quite mad because I live up here the year round," she was saying. "There's no making them understand that I like it. I tried at first but they insisted upon being sorry for me and that's a great strain on friendship, you know. So now we exchange pity."

"You've lived here a long time?" asked Archibald.

"Five years. I had no idea of staying when I came. This old farm had come into my father's hands years before and one summer Mother and I had fixed it up a bit and spent part of a summer in it. It was one of the few things that were left after my father's death. I came away here for healing—and I found it—after a time—here among my hills and my own people."

"Your own people?" the man echoed.

"Yes; they *are* mine now. The hills and the sky and the fields and the woods began my cure—taught me that beauty hadn't died because I was unhappy, but it was neighbouring that taught me to be happy again. We're a selfish lot with our loves, aren't we? I had been quite contented with my half dozen out of the world. The rest didn't count for me. They were just chorus—merry villagers, you know—quite unimportant except for stage effect. Then when I was left alone, I found that I needed those others—and that they needed me. After I learned that lesson, I put away sorrow. One doesn't forget, of course. One misses always; but one loves and helps and is glad. It's a joyful old world, isn't it?"

"In spots." The man's voice was dubious.

"Wait until you've adopted the Valley," advised the girl, laughingly. "You've made a splendid beginning with Peggy. In the meantime, Ellen's bringing hot scones and more plum jam. Who says this is a vale of tears?"

"It has its smiling moments," confessed the doubting one.

They talked of many things there beside the flickering fire.

The girl and her father had roamed the world in the days before he left her.

"We were alone together after Mother died," she said, "and he was restless always, though he kept laughter on his lips; so we went here and there, drifting back to New York now and again. He was the best of comrades and welcome everywhere. Dear old Dad! All the world made friends with him. He was Irish. Did I tell you that before? Clever, irresponsible, adorable Irish. Peggy and I have a bond in our Irish blood, but I've none of the brogue. The pity of it! Father's was creamy, always. You should have heard him tell an Irish story—and seen him tell it! No wonder it's easy for me to be happy even now that he's gone from me. I learned the way of it from him, though all the time he'd the broken heart over my mother's going."

She was talking half to herself now, and smiling into the fire as though she had forgotten the listening man.

"We were in New York when he went away from me," she said. "I couldn't believe that he was very ill. He had always been so alive—so splendidly, buoyantly alive. It seemed to me that, in the end, he would laugh at death and beat it off; but he knew.

"One afternoon he put out his hand to me and laughed—his gay laugh that I always loved.

"'I'm leaving you little except my blessing, Acushla,' he said. 'But you can't say I haven't given you a bully good time for a while.' Then he went to sleep smiling, and that was the end of it all."

She did not tell the thing sadly—had even a tender little laugh for the characteristic last words of the reckless, merry father she had loved so dearly; but there was a lump in Archibald's throat.

She had made him free of something more intimate than her birch glade or her sunset, and he thanked her for it in his heart.

The talk drifted away from personalities after that. She gave him bits of Valley history—humorous chiefly, though now and then pathos or tragedy showed its head, as it will wherever human lives are in question. She sang to him too, sweet old Irish love songs.

"But you should have heard Daddy sing them," she said. "He had a voice made just for love songs."

She was all aglow with interest and enthusiasm when he told her of the expedition to Pittsfield.

"Oh, the fun of it," she crowed jubilantly. "I've so longed to get things for her—loads of things—but I couldn't. There are so many who are in worse need of the little I can do. Did she tell you that I did try to give her a home here when her father disappeared? She wouldn't come. It wasn't that she didn't love me. She made that very clear; but she said that, being well and having Ellen, I didn't need her. She was ever so much obliged to me but she thought she'd just see to Mrs Potter and the babies. The Potters were so shiftless. You may be thankful that your artist ways earned you a reputation for shiftlessness here in the Valley. You'd never have had Peggy if you had seemed capable of taking care of yourself."

She made a list of things for Pegeen's outfit—necessaries that began where dresses and aprons ended, and she tried hard to reconcile consideration

for Archibald's purse with zeal for Pegeen's welfare, conscientiously cutting down first extravagant flights of imagination regarding underwear and stockings and then soaring recklessly into the realm of superfluities after a parasol.

"Peg has always been crazy for a parasol," she explained shamefacedly, "but of course it isn't really a necessity."

"The things one is crazy for are the only necessities," protested Archibald.

She beamed upon him.

"There's Irish in you, somewhere." Her eyes welcomed him as one of her blood. "Now most of these New England folk have never even suspected that great truth. They've an idea that being crazy for a thing damns it. They'll look upon a pink parasol for Peggy as a folly. Some of them will look upon it as a sin—but how Peg will adore it! I'd certainly cut down on something useful and uninteresting and buy her a pink parasol. Not an expensive one, you know. That would be silly, because it wouldn't make her any happier than a cheap one and happiness is the measure of excuse for folly, isn't it?"

"I wonder," said Archibald.

She was blithely sure of it, waved doubts away with a careless hand.

"Real happiness, of course. Not the Sodom's apple kind. The moment the apples begin to taste Sodomy, one must quit being foolish for the price beyond that is too high for defective apples; but as long as folly really makes us happy we're wise fools. I've bought my pink parasols in all kinds of markets and never grudged the underwear and stockings they cost me."

"You couldn't drive over to Pittsfield with us," suggested the man, tentatively

She shook her head.

"It's Peggy's day. I'd spoil it for her. She's

going off alone with a fairy prince and with Aladdin's lamp tucked under the buggy seat and she'd much better choose foolishly for herself than have some one choose wisely for her—not that I'd be wise. I'm all for pink parasols myself."

She looked it. Archibald admitted that to himself as he studied the laughing face over which the candle-light flickered softly.

Incidentally he made a mental note to the effect that Edison should be pilloried by womankind. Even the rarest of beauties lost charm under an electric glare, while in candle-light hair and eyes and lips and throat took on alluring mysteries—little half lights of confession, swift, fleeting, golden, high lights of revelation. The Smiling Lady's radiant serenity dissolved into witchery there in the candle-light. A dimple the man had not noticed before quivered in her left cheek, disappeared, came back into view. Elusive reservations had crept into the candid eyes. A *very* pink parasolish Young Person indeed!

Archibald hastily revised certain impressions having to do with Olympian detachment. Altogether human, this Lady of the Smiles. No Young Goddess, but half child, half woman, and wholly lovely. It was all wrong that she should be stranded here at the world's end, among alien folk, that she should be alone save for an old servant, shut away in the heyday of her youth from a world where pink parasols flaunted bravely up and down gay winding ways.

Then, oddly enough, a trail of faces drifted through his memory, women's faces seen against rose-coloured backgrounds on those same gay winding ways, and following them came a vision of the Smiling Lady, sitting among flowers and long grasses in a sunlit, woodland glade with young life tumbling round her. No, it wasn't possible to pity her. After all, there were pink parasols—and pink parasols.

IV

PEGEEN'S day dawned radiantly, a perfect June day of sun-warmed breezes and drifting, white clouds against an ardent, azure sky, and the small girl was as radiant as the day.

"I couldn't sleep for thinking of it," she said happily, as she brought in Archibald's breakfast.

For a moment she was silent, watching as usual with an anxious little frown while he broke the shell of the two-minute eggs, but when the ordeal was past and she once more made sure that fire and water had not betrayed her, she went on talking. Breakfast was always a conversational interlude at the shack.

"I dreamed a dreadful dream about you getting over to Pittsfield and not having any money and I cried so it waked me up, and then I got to thinking maybe it was a warning or something, so I prayed like fury. Mr Colby, the minister down in the village, says we oughtn't to pray for what we want, that we ought to pray for grace to want what the Lord thinks best for us to have, but it seems to me that's a silly way to pray. When we've got a thing we've just got to make the best of it and that's all there is to it, but I believe in getting to work early and praying for something it'll be easy to make the best of. I told God that if anything horrid *was* going to happen I wished to goodness He'd stave it off till after I had my hat, and I think He will."

"Nothing horrid is going to happen." Archibald spoke with the assurance of one who has inside information. "We are going to have the time of our

young lives, Peggy. Never mind the dishes this morning. You can do them to-morrow,"

She shook her head.

"No, sir, please. That's a poor way. I'd rather do them. Like as not if I didn't a greasy plate would pop into my mind just when I was trying on my hat and spoil things. It's perfectly terrible to have disagreeable things jump out at you when everything's pleasant as can be. I'd lots rather clean up as I go along."

"What if you can't wash your dirty dishes, Peg?"

The man's tone was queer, though he smiled, and the girl, sensitive to undercurrents, looked up at him quickly.

"Oh, well," she said and there was a comforting note in her voice, "when I simply can't, I just put them to soak in soapy water and try to forget them. It's wonderful how easy they are to do after a little if you let them soak while you go off and do something else."

"Yes—I suppose so." He was evidently doubtful. "Well, we're not in a mad rush, so clean up as you go along. It's a good habit, but I always seem to have dirty dishes left over. Come down to Neal's when you are ready. I'm going to get the horse."

A half hour later the two drove down the Valley road, while Mrs Neal leaned over her front gate to watch them go.

The old buggy was shabby, the old horse was physically and temperamentally incapable of anything more spirited than a jog-trot; but Pegeen could not have been prouder, more rapturous, if she had been taking the road with the coach and four of her dreams.

Her faded blue dress had been washed and starched to aggressive crispness. Her heavy mop of black

curls was tied with the cherished pink hair ribbons that had been the Smiling Lady's last Christmas present. Under the battered old straw hat whose rose-wreathed successor was waiting in Pittsfield for Pegeen's coming, the expressive face was all aflame with excitement and happiness.

Archibald looked down into the dark blue eyes that were well-springs of bubbling joy, and felt oddly young himself.

"Isn't it splendid," the small girl said breathlessly—"going off on an adventure this way, just you and me in a buggy. I've been twice before, but in a wagon both times. That was nice too, but a buggy's so much eleganter. I do hope they'll all see us. Mrs Benderby's washing at the Pratts' to-day. I told her we were going to start at nine, so she'll be looking out for us and like as not she's told everybody else, so they'll all be watching. Folks here in the Valley are awfully interested in things and they've been sort of excited about my going up to take care of you. You see they couldn't tell how it'd turn out, you being from New York and an artist and not smiling at anybody, and all that, but now when they see me driving to Pittsfield with you in a buggy and you looking so jolly and nice, they'll know that everything's come out beautifully. I knew it would all the time 'n' Miss Moran said:

"'Peg, everybody knows how to smile at the world, but some people are dreadfully out of practice.' She said when you found out there were other folks in the world beside yourself maybe you'd smile at them, and now you're beginning to do it. When you get real well acquainted with everybody here in the Valley, I shouldn't wonder if you'd simply grin. There's Mrs Ransom and Sally on their side stoop, watching for us!"

She bounced joyously on the hard leather seat

and waved both hands wildly toward two women, who waved answering salutes.

"Mr Ransom's a deacon and he won't let Sally go anywhere except to church, or have beaux or anything. Don't you think it's a shame—and she's pretty as a picture too, and all the boys are perfectly crazy about her. Her mother's just like a scared little white rabbit—pale blue eyes and wrinkly little nose and everything. The neighbours say she's afraid to breathe and Sally doesn't stand up to her father because he takes it out on her mother and Mrs Ransom's so afraid. Miss Moran's about the only one that dares to go there much, but she isn't afraid of anything and Deacon Ransom can't be perfectly nasty to her. Nobody can. Why, even Bill Briggs, that drinks so and swears something awful at everybody, he's got to be real friendly with Miss Moran. She hurt her ankle one day climbing a fence down by the back road and Bill Briggs happened to come along. He wasn't so very drunk, but anybody else would have been scared half to death of him. Miss Moran just upped and called to him:

"'Oh, Mr Briggs,' she said, 'I'm so glad you came along. I've hurt myself and I'll have to get you to help me home.' He told folks that he cussed once or twice from habit, but she looked so nice and friendly and so glad he was there and so sure he was going to fix things for her, that he went over and helped her up and took her home—carried her the last part of the way—and when they got to the house she made him come in and have dinner and now he's sobered up some and he works for her a good deal, but he doesn't talk hardly at all when he's around there. He can't talk without swearing and he doesn't like to swear before her, so you'd most think he was deaf and dumb when he's working at her place."

The drive down the Valley was a continuous performance of waving greetings, and running commentary. Pegeen did not gossip. She simply overflowed; and Archibald found the people of whom she talked taking very definite shape in his mind. He felt distinctly interested in pretty Sally Ransom and profane Bill Briggs and Ginsy Shalloway, the seamstress, who went around sewing and knew all about everybody, and Ezra Watts who wasn't respectable and was suspected of stealing everything that disappeared.

Really, the country wasn't the lonely place Archibald had always believed it to be. It was full of people and of drama. And though the man had run away from women and men and vowed himself to misanthropic seclusion, his Valley neighbours seen through Pegeen's friendly, tolerant eyes seemed likeable folk. Even Ezra Watts, the not respectable, got the benefit of Peg's doubt. "It's handy to have somebody to lay things on," she said. "'N' I guess Ezra gets credit for lots of things he doesn't do—like when Mr Sanderson was sure his saw and auger had been stolen and then one day old Granny Sanderson had a dream that they were under the bed springs and sure enough there they were on the cords, where Mr Sanderson had left them himself when he'd been fixing the bed. Ezra's got a terrier dog, Bingo, that loves him like everything, and Miss Moran says when Bingo turns his back on Ezra, she'll believe the man's as bad as he's painted, but not till then. It's awfully hard for Miss Moran to believe anybody's bad, 'n' I guess mostly they aren't."

On the main street of Pisgah, the little village at the end of the Valley, Pegeen suddenly bounced higher than usual on the buggy seat.

"Oh—please—there's Jimmy. Oh, do stop, Mr Archibald."

A sturdy, barefooted boy sat on the stone wall under a spreading maple-tree, whittling nonchalantly and with an air of profound indifference to passers-by.

"Jimmy," called Pegeen eagerly, "Jimmy Dawes."

The boy looked up from his whittling, showing two merry brown eyes and a most engaging grin.

"'Lo," he conceded, trying to look as if he had not been watching for Pegeen's triumphal progress.

She leaned out from the buggy, glowing, eager, sure of sympathy, in spite of the apparent lack of enthusiasm.

"I'm going to Pittsfield, Jimmy. I'm going to have a new hat—with pink roses!"

Jimmy Dawes's eyes sought Archibald's.

"Ain't girls the limit?" he said genially, as man to brother man.

But Pegeen refused to be suppressed.

"'N' a new dress 'n' shoes!" she confided happily.

Jimmy, having asserted the superiority of his sex, like many a male creature before him, felt that he could afford to humour the inferior feminine.

"That's great!" he said with warm friendliness. "You'll look fine."

Pegeen beamed upon him. "I knew you'd be glad," she said. "This is Mr Archibald, Jimmy. I'm seeing to him."

The grin on the boy's face widened to show more of his white teeth. There was something refreshingly wholesome about the soundness and whiteness of those teeth, the amplitude of the grin, the clear frankness of the eyes, the tanned ruddiness of the skin, the sturdiness of his two brown legs.

"I guess you'll get seen to all right, if Peg's on the job," he said.

"Come down and see us, Jimmy," urged Pegeen.

"Yes, do. Come down and go fishing with me," added Archibald, and then wondered at himself for

having said it. He had never cared for small boys —nor for small girls. Come to think of it, he had never really known any.

"All right. I'll show you some dandy pools." Jimmy's acceptance was prompt and blithe. He was used to comradeship and confident that Peg wouldn't vouch for an undesirable.

"He's the nicest boy," Archibald's companion explained as they drove away. "Mostly they pester, you know, but Jimmy doesn't. He treats you as if you were another boy 'n' when you can't do things, he sort of pretends it's because you don't want to 'n' the other boys don't dare be horrid when he's around 'cause he can do most everything better than they can, and he licked every single one of them—when he first came. He said he didn't do it because he was mad, but just to show them and get it over."

"He hasn't always lived here then?" asked Archibald.

"Oh no. He just stays with his grandfather and grandmother. His father married again down in New York 'n' I guess Jimmy missed his mother 'n' then his father didn't think cities were good for boys, 'n' old Mrs Dawes adores Jimmy, 'n' so he's going to live here for awhile. Mr Colby—the minister, you know—teaches him queer things like Latin and algebra 'n' some day he'll have to go away and be educated and rich."

Her lips drooped woefully at the thought—but reassurances came quickly. "He says he's such an awful dub at Latin that he won't be ready for college for years 'n' years. That's lucky anyway."

The road left the Valley behind and climbed skyward between lines of wonderfully built stone walls that had little in common with the vagabond, straggling stone heaps that marked property confines in the Valley. Behind the walls orchards clung to the sloping hillsides—old orchards that gave

evidences of early care and training but were lapsing from grace in their latter days. They had not been able to live up to the walls that enclosed them, yet the broad spreading trees had a dignity of their own. They were decaying but they had given bountifully in their day. One felt that.

"The men who built these walls were in earnest," Archibald said reflectively as he eyed the width and height of them, their perfect alignment, their broad level tops.

Pegeen nodded.

"Shakers," she explained. "I guess they're always awfully in earnest, only they used to build fences 'n' now they mostly pray. You see there don't seem to be many men with them now and women have got to pray when they're in earnest. They can't build walls."

"That may be one way of building walls."

She saw what he meant. Pegeen usually saw what people meant. That was one reason she was such a comforting small person.

"Yes, I know, but it's sort of nice to leave walls standing up to show for years 'n' years. Women bake 'n' scrub 'n' wash dishes 'n' the next day it's all gone and has to be done over again. The Shaker women are working like sixty and they're perfectly splendid at praying, but the farms are running down. I do think it's sort of discouraging being a woman—but I like it."

"Bless your heart!" There was a tenderness for more than the child in Archibald's eyes as he looked down into the sensitive glowing face—a sudden tenderness for all the dear women who found their womanhood discouraging, yet gloried in it.

Faces looked out through the shining windows of the great brick buildings as the man and girl drove through the Shaker village—sweet, kindly faces that smiled in return to Pegeen's waving hand.

"They're such dears," she said enthusiastically. "They wanted me to come up here when I didn't have anybody, but I'd rather come sometimes for a little while and then go away where the folks aren't so holy and clean all the time. I love them to death and it's terribly noble to go off and not get married and wear scoop bonnets and keep your floors as white as chalk, but I guess I'm not noble inside—'n' anyway, if all the women went off and were holy and clean who'd see to the dirty and unholy folks?"

"Peggy," said Archibald, earnestly, urgently, "if you should ever feel an attack of cleanly holiness coming on—the noble kind—fight it off. Take something for it. We unholy dirty sinners need you."

"Don't worry." Pegeen's tone was reassuring. "I'm not going to wear a scoop bonnet—not while there are hats with pink roses on them—but the Shakers are darlings all the same. Miss Moran just loves them."

"She's a very loving person." There was an edge of criticism in his voice.

Pegeen thought it over.

"Yes, she is," she admitted finally. "She loves most anybody—but then there are a few she loves *especially* and that's quite different. It's like being loved by a foreign missionary and being loved by your mother, you know. I'd lots rather be loved because I was nice than because I was a human soul, wouldn't you?"

"I would," assented Archibald with fervour.

When Susy, the Neal horse, had been entrusted to the tender care of a livery stable hostler in Pittsfield and the two whom she had brought from over the hills turned their faces toward Ranson and Kirby's Dry Goods Emporium, Pegeen's feet absolutely refused to conduct themselves sedately. Skip

they would, in spite of all of her ideas of seemly behaviour. Four sedate steps and then a skip was the final compromise, and in order to achieve that Peg had to anchor to something substantial.

She slipped a small brown hand into her companion's large one and looked up at him with dancing eyes.

"If I don't hold on to something, I'll go up like a balloon," she confided. "I don't feel as if I weighed anything—especially my feet 'n' my heart."

Archibald squeezed the small hand tightly.

"Miss Pegeen O'Neill, if you should let your feet float up and your head thump down, I should consider you a Young Person unfit to be trusted with a hat trimmed in pink roses."

She chuckled gaily.

"But think of the chance the new shoes and stockings would have," she urged. "I guess I can stay down though, if you don't let go."

So they went into the shop hand in hand. Salesfolk and customers looked at the pair—and looked again, and smiled—kindly smiles, touched with curiosity. The two were so oddly mated—the tall lean man with his clean-cut, homely, clever face, his air of authority, his loose-hanging, irreproachably-cut, well-worn tweeds, the slim shabby little girl with happiness flooding her eyes, dimpling her cheeks, playing over her lips.

"Ain't she a good feeler though!" a blonde at the ribbon counter remarked to the girl next to her. "Makes you ache to see anybody as pleased with things as all that."

"I c'd be sort of pleased with his Nibs myself," admitted the friend. "Nobody's pretty boy but kind of mannish and looks as if he had the price, and c'd be parted from it if he felt good and like it. Guess he's feelin' like it all right too. Wonder who they are? The kid's in right. Anybody c'n see that!"

Archibald, still holding Pegeen's hand, appealed to a stately and suave floor-walker.

"I want to do some shopping for this young lady," he explained—"a good deal of shopping, and I'm hopelessly incapable. Now you must have some woman about the place who could take us in hand—sort of advisory committee, pilot, first-aid rôle, someone with good sense and good taste. We're strong on taste ourselves but we're not so sure of our sense, eh, Peg?"

She beamed up at him and then transferred the beam to the floor-walker who melted into a semblance of human interest and enthusiasm.

"Our Miss Carter's just what you need," he said. "I'll send for her. She'll be invaluable. I'd go with you myself, only duty—and of course a woman——"

"Exactly," agreed Archibald.

Our Miss Carter materialised as a plump little woman with a firm chin, a pleasant voice and kindly brown eyes behind eyeglasses. She understood the situation at once, without fuss, without debate. Archibald gave her Miss Moran's list and she read it gravely.

"The hat and the parasol seem to be the most important things," she said without hesitation. "Suppose we get them first."

Pegeen's hand squeezed Archibald's ecstatically. Here was a sensible, intelligent person with a sense of values.

The pink roses were not "large pink roses" after all. Not that a heavily marcelled and enamelled daughter of Israel, under Miss Carter's stimulus, did not show the shoppers an uncommonly fine line of enormous pink roses. She was unflagging in her efforts. She called Pegeen "my dear" from the start and after the first few hats, bestowed an occasional "my dear" upon Archibald, in her fine glow

of friendly feeling; but there was a certain mushroom-brimmed little hat, faced in pink and wreathed in wild roses, to which Pegeen lost her heart utterly, irrevocably, at first sight.

"They're so darling and Valleyish," she explained to Archibald, and he understood what she meant. Moreover, the piquant little face and the wild-rose hat rhymed in a way to satisfy his artist soul and to strengthen his growing conviction that Pegeen was headed toward beauty and already well on the way. The parasol was easily chosen—a pink one to match the hat—but on the subject of frocks there was serious debate. Archibald centred his affections upon a pink linen that Miss Carter considered impracticable from the point of view of laundering.

"Of course if she could afford to have a great many," she began. The artist waved the laundry problem aside.

"We will take the pink one," he announced firmly, and Pegeen heaved a sigh of satisfaction, though she had nobly sided with the advisory committee on the subject of laundering.

"And a couple of white things," said Archibald —"and then be as practical as you please, so long as practical doesn't mean ugly." There were ten frocks in the pile when they called a halt and Pegeen's astonished eyes were so widely, darkly blue that they seemed to fill most of her face. "Now a coat and raincoat," prompted the Fairy Godfather —and when the coats were chosen, he felt in his pockets for his pipe.

"I'm through," he said—"you can run the rest of the show, on your own, Miss Carter. There's the list, and you know what a girl her age ought to have. Get her shoes big enough and buy her everything she needs. Then I want you to take her somewhere and put her into the pink outfit—whole business; I'll be out in front when you get through."

An hour later, as he sat on a nail-keg in front of the hardware store next door, a vision appeared to him—a vision in pink—a vision of youth incarnate, all smiles and blushes, and tremulous hope, and heart-clutching fear.

Slowly, she turned round before him, once—twice. Then she stood still and looked at him anxiously from under the rose-wreathed new hat.

"Do you like me?" she asked, her voice high and wobbly from excitement.

"Ye gods!" he murmured feebly. "Is this the young person who is seeing to me?"

"Yes, sir," she assured him hastily. "She's got work clothes too, but she's adventuring to-day."

"My dear," said Archibald, half seriously, "in a few years, it will be a very perilous adventure to look as pretty as all that."

They went in to pay the bill and to thank Miss Carter, who tried in vain to look as though she had not been watching them through the window and as though she were not consumed by curiosity about them. Then they strolled away down Main Street and once more the little brown hand slipped into the big brown one.

"I don't feel so skippy," Pegeen explained, "but my throat's funny and I've got to squeeze something. I wish I had the Johnston twins here. They are so fat and soft and nice to hug."

At the hotel where the two lunched, they apparently created a ripple in the summer crowd's sea of dullness. Even the dowagers and spinsters knitting on the long verandahs looked interested and dropped a stitch or two as the apparition in pink lilted past them; and when Pegeen, seated at a table in the big dining-room, smiled shyly, radiantly, confidingly, at the world from under the brim of the rose-wreathed hat, the world smiled back at her without reservation. It was as though the spirit of eternal

youth had passed that way and set even the most scarred world-worn hearts beating to forgotten tunes.

The child's eyes were like stars, her cheeks were pinker than her dainty frock. Happiness—unalloyed, effervescent, illimitable happiness enveloped her from the most aspiring tendril of the wild rose-wreath to the toe-tips of the shining new shoes. And when she looked across the table at the Fairy Godfather in prosaic tweed, adoration elbowed rapture in the look.

"I've got my legs twisted around the table leg, so I can't float up," she told him, leaning forward and speaking in confidential tones, out of consideration for the waiter, "but I wouldn't be a mite surprised if something would go bang, and I'd wake up at Mrs Benderby's in my old blue gingham and find out that I'd been dreaming you and the hat and everything."

She behaved very prettily in spite of her excitement. Watching her, Archibald found himself thinking of what Mrs Neal had said about the frail, proud, little mother whom love and life had broken. The hint of race and breeding in Pegeen's face must have come from her—the dainty ways of the child too. There was no awkwardness about the small girl's manner though this was her first introduction to a hotel menu, a waiter's service, a crowd's scrutiny. Archibald had wondered often at the purity of her speech, which for all its childish inconsequence held none of the vulgarisms of the untrained, and now he realised that her table manners, like her grammar, must have had early and thorough attention. Poor little mother, how she would love the child now! How she must have loved the father of the child when she tossed her own world aside for him!

"You're looking sorry!" said the girl across the table from him. She was amazed—reproachful.

How was it possible for anyone to be sorry on such a day!

"I was being sorry for all the fairy godfathers whose godchildren aren't exactly like you, Peggy," the man explained, and she forgave him.

The drive home was quieter than that of the morning. Pegeen was as happy as she had been, but between the happiness of anticipation and the happiness of content, the heart travels far. She was satisfied now to lean against the shabby, leather-covered back of the buggy-seat and watch the shadows lengthen across the meadows and steal silently up towards the sun-gilded hill-tops.

Once in a while she looked up at Archibald to see if he was contented too. Their eyes met and then they went back to their thoughts and dreams. There were snatches of talk, flung out from Pegeen's drifting thoughts. She wondered why pink was the happiest colour and she wondered whether the black sheep in a flock was proud or ashamed, and she thought the father birds must teach the baby birds to fly because it would give mother birds nervous prostration to do it, and she guessed God didn't give you any credit for loving all his works when you were very happy because it was easy as rolling off a log, and she was quite sure that people who lived in white houses were happier than people who lived in grey houses, and she was afraid Miss Moran would think they'd spent too much money.

"She's coming up to see things just as soon as we get home. She promised she would. Maybe she'll be there when we get there. We're driving so slowly and I told her we'd surely be home before six."

"Why, bless my soul, Peg, are we fixed for visitors?" Archibald's tone held consternation, but Pegeen treated his doubt with scorn.

"Everything's as clean as can be, and fresh flowers and a fire laid, and I told her the key would be under

the loose brick, if anything kept us and she got there first."

It occurred to the man that there would be something extremely agreeable about finding the Smiling Lady waiting in the shack when evening brought him home. He was reconciled to the leisureliness of Susy's ambling gait, but Pegeen insisted upon speed. She was afraid that it wouldn't be light enough for everybody to see her hat and dress, unless they hurried.

"Of course they'd see if afterwards," she admitted, "but they'll be watching and it would be nice for them to talk about this evening—'n' then I promised Jimmy."

So Susy was urged to do her best and the sun was still shining on the Valley when the returning adventurers turned into Pisgah's main street and encountered Jimmy Dawes, still barefoot but painfully scoured and elegant in a clean shirt and flaming red tie.

Archibald stopped without orders and Pegeen stood up in the buggy to give her friend the full benefit of her glory. She even raised the pink parasol to add to the scenic effect.

"Well, by Jingo, would you have thought it!" Jimmy's amazement was most satisfactory. "Ain't she a peach?" he asked Archibald with that awed bewilderment with which the masculine always regards feminine metamorphoses. "Why, Peg, you're getting good-looking."

"I've got," said Pegeen, with no undue elation but with deep conviction. There had been mirrors in Ranson and Kirby's Emporium and she had consulted them without prejudice.

"Of course I'm not going to wear these all the time, but I'm not bad even in the dark gingham ones," she asserted tranquilly.

"Well, don't get stuck on yourself, that's all," counselled Jimmy.

"Gracious, no. It's only the clothes," she explained. "I'm not any different."

The Valley was provided with something to talk about that evening. The fading sunlight rallied and glowed upon the pink frock and the roses, as Pegeen made her triumphal journey along the white road. An astonishing number of the Valley folk happened to be leaning over front gates or sitting on front stoops or standing in front doorways. Peggy waved her pink parasol at all, and to those who came down to the gates she called gay greetings and snatches of information about the wonderful happenings of the day.

"If it wasn't so late, we'd stop and tell them all about everything," she said to Archibald. "It seems almost mean not to. They'd enjoy it so much, but anyway they've seen this dress and my hat and parasol, and that's a lot. Ginsy Shalloway could talk about that much for weeks 'n' weeks. Maybe it's nicer for them to have things spread out and not know about the other clothes and dinner at the hotel and the floor-walker and Miss Carter and everything all at once. I'm going to tell Miss Moran every single thing, though. I feel as if I'd have to tell it all to somebody this very night or I'd explode, and she's the nicest person possible to tell things to. She always understands exactly how everything was and how you felt and what you thought. You don't have to explain a bit—just tell her things as fast as ever you can 'n' she keeps up. Don't you think the nicest people in the world are the people you don't have to explain to?"

"I don't know but what you are right"—Archibald thought it over. "Yes; I'm sure you're right, Peg. It's a great thing to have anyone understand when you do explain; and if somebody understands without having to explain—yes; you're undoubtedly right."

"Well, Miss Moran's like that. You tell her a word or two and she knows the rest. That's why she gets on with all kinds of people the way she does."

Mrs Neal was at the gate when Susy stopped before it, and Mr Neal, thin, leathery, solemn mannered but twinkling eyed, rose from a chair on the porch and strolled out to take the horse.

"Land's sakes, Peg, you're a treat!"—Mrs Neal's fat face was radiant with delight. "Talk about fine feathers! Why, that's as tasty a hat as I ever saw, and as sweet a face under it, I don't care where the next comes from."

Pegeen opened her parasol and turned round and round excitedly before her admirer.

"'N' there's more in boxes," she announced. "Heaps—'n' there was strawberry ice cream 'n' finger bowls 'n'—— We've got to go, Miss Moran'll be there, but just as soon as I get my breakfast dishes washed I'll run down 'n' tell you all about everything. Oh, Mrs Neal, it was perfectly grand. It was better'n the measles—only, of course I love Miss Moran best. Anyway I love her just as well. Seems as if I could love anybody though, when I've got this hat and dress 'n' parasol. I'm sorry I ever said Benny Crocker was a nasty little toad. He isn't really, 'n' anyway toads are kind of cunning."

"I guess all the unloving things you ever said wouldn't make much of a spot on your pink outfit," —Mrs Neal chuckled reassuring—"and, if you ask me, it's the toad you wasn't fair to when you compared that Crocker imp to it. I'm partial to toads myself. They're my best help in the garden."

"Good-night." Pegeen stretched two thin arms up, slipped them round the neck of the woman who stooped to her, and kissed the broad expanse of cheek. "Maybe you don't like kissing," she said apologetically, "but I couldn't help it. I hope I

won't meet anybody I oughtn't to kiss to-night, 'cause, like as not, I'd up and do it anyway. Good-night, Mr Neal."

She gave Susy a love pat.

"You won't ever be a plain farm-horse any more, Susy," she said. "You've been part of an adventure."

"Like's not she'll be too upity to plough at all," drawled Mr Neal.

"She'll plough lots better"—Pegeen was sure of it. "She'll have something to remember and something to look forward to—'cause anything that's happened once could happen again. Things like ploughing and washing dishes are fun if something has happened and something's going to happen. Good-night, everybody. I s'pose I don't really need my parasol open but I do love to carry it that way."

She and Archibald went away up the meadow path, arms full of packages, hearts full of content. It had been a good day.

Mrs Neal listened to the happy, excited voice of the small girl as it floated back to her on the still evening air.

"Well, Pa," she said, with smiling satisfaction, "looks as if that child's guardian angel'd sat up at last and took notice."

There were lights in the shack. Archibald and Peggy saw them as soon as they turned into the meadow.

"She's there!" the child cried happily. "I knew she'd wait. She's splendid about promises. My, isn't it good to come home!"

To Archibald's astonishment, it *was* good to come home. He could not remember ever having had the feeling before. Involuntarily he quickened his steps. The end of a happy day and someone waiting, and the lights of home.

Pegeen ran on ahead, with a shrill shout of

greeting, and suddenly a girl's figure stood in the doorway, silhouetted greyly 'twixt twilight and lamplight.

"Welcome, wanderers!" cried a gay voice.

Pegeen was caught in strong, young arms, hugged, kissed, questioned, all in a breath.

"Was it perfect, Peggy? Not a cloud? Such a duck of a frock, dear! And the hat! *Oh, sweet!* The very hat of hats for you. Darling wee roses and a heavenly pink, and so becoming! Peg, I must hug you again. I really must."

Pegeen returned the embrace fervently.

"There isn't anything like hugging when you feel all bouncy inside," she said. "I most did it to Susy."

"I've been overlooked"—Archibald's voice was mournful, and the child, all contrition, flew at him and turned a glowing flower face up for his kiss.

"I wanted to, something *awful,*" she acknowledged shamelessly, "but I didn't dare." Then she kissed Ellen rapturously, while a young woman in an enveloping bib apron ducked a respectful courtesy to Archibald.

"Ellen and I hope we'll suit, sir," she said demurely. "Miss Pegeen O'Neill's our riference. I'm sure she'd be sayin' a good wur'rd for us, the way that you'd not be worryin' over our bein' alone with your spoons—though it's few spoons we've found, to be sure."

The brogue was rich as cream. The eyes were a bit confusing, the dimples bereft the man of speech, and the apron—was ever a feminine garment so bewitching as an apron!

"You've been getting supper for us?" Archibald stammered at last.

"We have that—" She was all sweet apology. "Ellen and I've been taking liberties. It was Peggy's big day, you know. We couldn't let her

come home and do her work as though it were an ordinary evening, so we put up a basket of supper —and we've cooked some biscuits in your oven— and you'll forgive us, won't you? Sure, you've had a whole day of playing Fairy Godfather. You couldn't grudge us our wee bit offering at the quiet end of the day."

There was nothing he could have grudged her when she looked at him like that. 'Twas not in the heart of man to deal grudgingly with the Smiling Lady.

"If you please, miss, the biscuits will be overdone," warned Ellen, and, a moment later, Archibald was looking across the table into a face bewilderingly sweet, while Pegeen, still wearing her beloved hat, though she had reluctantly furled the pink parasol, sat between her two best beloveds and beamed impartially, first on one and then on the other.

"Let's say grace," she urged. "It's the graciest supper I ever had 'n' it seems as if we ought."

Archibald looked aghast; but the Smiling Lady took the suggestion as a good one.

"Dear God," she said—and she spoke casually, as friend to very present friend—"make us all very happy and very loving and very grateful on big days and little days."

"'Specially little days, 'cause we can do it ourselves on big days," amended Pegeen, as she reached for a biscuit.

V

MRS NEAL saved Pegeen the trouble of keeping her promise to run down and tell her all about the day in Pittsfield.

The breakfast dishes were washed at the shack, but Pegeen was busily tidying the living-room, and Archibald was only half-way through his after-breakfast smoke when the bulky form of their neighbour appeared in the doorway.

"My soul!" she commented cheerfully. "You folks don't keep country hours, do you? Pa and I had breakfast pretty nigh three hours ago. I might 'a' known you'd be backwards if I'd stopped to think; but, you see, I'd got through all my chores and it seemed as if the heft of the morning was over, so I just ran along up to see Peg's new clothes. I allowed the pile was too big for her to bring down to me. I'm some big myself but I c'n navigate handier than a lot of boxes and bundles can. You said you was coming down this morning to tell me all about everything, Peg, but I thought I could see and hear at the same time. Don't want to bother you though. Maybe I'd rather come up later."

Archibald uttered a prompt protest.

"You're not bothering anybody, Mrs Neal. We're lazy but hospitable. At least I'm lazy. Peggy's not; but she's an indulgent person, so she doesn't insist on ramping around very early in the mornings. It isn't as if I were farming, you know. I can get at my painting any time I feel like it, and when I don't feel like it I don't do good painting; so there you are! No merit in my getting up with

the early bird; my own special worm wouldn't be out."

Mrs Neal settled into the chair he had pushed forward to her and chuckled comfortably.

"Sort of a lazy man's job, ain't it?" she said; "but it takes all sorts of work to keep the world moving and everybody happy. I guess there's folks in the cities that like your kind of pictures. They look sort of daubed up and queer to me, though. Sitting over here, that one on the painting stand by the window don't look like anything at all but a mess of greens."

Pegeen turned indignant eyes upon the art critic.

"Why, Mrs Neal! That's a piece of the woods above Baker's Spring, 'n' it's perfectly lovely. I can most smell the woodsy things growing."

"Smell nothing!—without it's turpentine!" Mrs Neal was genial but firm in her opinion. "You ain't got a call to be mad, Peg. Mr Archibald don't care. Didn't I say there was folks that'd like his kind of pictures? I ain't educated. That's what's the matter with me, and I know it, but there's no use pretending I don't like my pictures plain and clear and neat. You ain't so awful educated either, but you're different. You've got imagination to look with. I've only got far-sighted specs—and that young eye doctor over at Pittsfield made a bad guess on them too."

"Fire away, Mrs Neal," laughed the painter. "I've known other people who didn't like my pictures. Some day I'll paint you a nice, clear, tidy one of your house and garden. I really can, you know."

The visitor's broad face beamed delight.

"Say, will you? That'd be fine. Pa and I'd be tickled most to death—when the flowers along the front walk get going real good, you know—and maybe Pa and me on the front porch!"

"Anything you say."

"Well, you're real kind. I guess Peg's had you sized up right along, but it don't take much to be nice to Peg. When it comes to being nice to a fat old party like me, you're proving something. Say, were you figuring to go off painting somewheres this mornin'?"

Archibald blinked, looked at her thoughtfully, and grinned.

"I can," he said amiably.

"Oh, don't you do it, unless you were going anyway, but you most always do and so they thought it'd be all right and wouldn't bother you and——"

"Where are they?" Archibald asked comprehendingly.

"Well, they're sort of waiting around down at my house. I was to wave a towel or something if you were gone. We didn't any of us realise about you not getting up early, and everybody was crazy to see Peg's dresses and things. Ginsy Shalloway's curiosity was boiling so hard when I left that it most moved her false front up and down like a kettle cover. She took a mornin' off from Mrs Frisbie so as to come down here, but it don't make much difference, for Mrs Frisbie was coming anyway."

"Save the false front, Mrs Neal," Archibald urged. "I'll take myself out of the way and Peggy will lend you a towel to wave."

Mrs Neal smiled at him in friendly fashion.

"They'd all like first rate to meet you some other time," she said, "but, seein' it's about clothes and all, I guess things 'ud be freer and easier without you this mornin'. My apron'll do to wave, Peg."

As Archibald climbed the wood trail behind the shack, he looked through an opening in the leafiness and counted eight feminine figures filing out of the Neals' side gate and taking the meadow path.

He laughed, as he stood holding the branches

aside, but there was a pleasant warmth at his heart. Neighbours of his!

He was still feeling neighbourly when an hour or two later he wandered down the western slope of Pine Knob and found himself confronted by the bars beyond which a crooked lane led through the land of the Smiling Lady to the white farmhouse under the maples. He glanced at the sun, then looked at his watch. Eleven o'clock. Time enough for an hour's neighbouring and a stroll around by the road to his one o'clock dinner. Morning calls were informal but they seemed to be the accepted thing in the Happy Valley, and the Smiling Lady would send him away quite frankly and amiably if he was in the way. He felt sure of that. She would never allow a man to make a nuisance of himself.

He found her in the vegetable garden and she waved a trowel at him in a fashion that left no doubt as to his welcome.

"Heaven Sent One!" she hailed, coming toward the fence to meet him. "I prayed for a man—an able-bodied, obliging man, and behold! I had set my heart on a morning's gardening and John had to take the horse to the blacksmith. It was absolutely necessary. He explained it all to me very clearly. As a matter of fact, John hates gardening as the devil hates holy water. He'll commit any of the venial sins to escape it. I telephoned for Bill Briggs but he's been away for two days, so even if I could put a hand on him he wouldn't be garden-worthy. The last time he pulled up all my young spinach and transplanted a lot of very superior plantain into the lettuce bed—but he gave me a day's work for nothing afterward. Bill's 'overtaken' sometimes. He admits it, but he's a gentleman. Can you dig?"

The wind had ruffled her hair into wild disorder. The hand that held the trowel was grubby. The

other hand was grubbier. There was a broad streak of dirt across one cheek and a smudge on her forehead. Her short blue denim skirt was caked with earth at the knees. A shockingly untidy young woman, but, as she stood in the sunlight, laughing, Archibald could have shouted for joy in the free glad life of her. It was good just to be in the world with anything so young and brave and gay—and so lovely. Yes; even when wind and gardening had done their worst, so very lovely. Where was the man who could refuse to dig for her?

"Lead me to a spade," he urged valiantly.

Two hours later, Ellen coming out in the garden to announce dinner, found two dirty, tired, but cheerful beings scrambling across freshly pulverised earth on all-fours.

"The saints preserve us!" she exclaimed piously.

"They will, Ellen. That's their job! But I'm putting in beets and Mr Archibald's planting beans."

The Smiling Lady sat back on her heels, pushed back her hair with a grimy hand, and looked up into the disapproving face of the scandalised personage in spotless blue chambray and white apron and cap.

"You can't think what a success Mr Archibald's been."

The man at the other end of the garden looked up and grinned his gratitude for the testimonial, then went back to his absorbing task.

"He's wasted on painting, Ellen," the girl went on gaily. "When you bring artistic genius to bear on a vegetable garden, you're getting somewhere; but pictures—Pouff! Who eats pictures? He's strong, too—and willing—and very industrious. I don't see but what our gardening problem is solved for this summer."

"If you could be seein' yourself, Miss Nora!"

Ellen's voice was dripping with disapproval.

"But I can't. That's the beauty of it. And

when I go up to make myself tidy, I sha'n't look in the mirror until after I've washed—so I'll never know the worst—and gardening's no fun at all if one keeps clean. Look at Mr Archibald. He was perfectly clean when he came—painfully clean. Isn't he splendid now?"

Archibald had finished his row and came toward them, sleeves rolled up, collar a limp rag, coatless, perspiring, dirt encrusted, radiating satisfaction.

"There isn't a bean a twentieth of an inch out of plumb in that row," he boasted. "Straight as a string, the whole procession. It'll be a garden ornament.

"Funny thing, I never planted a seed before in my life. I can't believe the things'll come up—and I'm likely to perish of joy and pride if they do. You'll have to break the news to me gently, Miss Moran. There's something about getting down to the soil——"

"Ellen thinks we've got down to too much soil," explained the girl who had risen to her feet and was futilely brushing at her skirt. "She has an old-fashioned prejudice in favour of cleanliness and I suppose we'll have to humour her by washing before dinner. Stiff?"

"Not a bit."

"Well, you will be," she promised encouragingly. "I always am, at first. Gardening is queer. Every time I finish a day of it, I vow that the game isn't worth the candle and that I'll eat tinned stuff and use wild flowers for the rest of my life. Then the next morning, I fairly wriggle with impatience to get out into the garden and go to digging again. It's as bad as the cocaine habit. If you aren't willing to be a slave to it, you'd better turn your back on it here and now."

"Too late. I'm a victim—and you'll have to oversee my digging. It's the least you can do when

you've started me on my downward way. Don't you think so, Ellen?"

"Go your ways in and make yourselves decent, the two of you."

Ellen's voice was stern but her eyes were merry.

"You've made a tremendous hit with her," the Smiling Lady confided to him as they went through the hall. "She's never nice and disrespectful to anybody unless she likes him enormously.

He stayed to dinner, after a faint-hearted protest and a murmur of contrition in regard to Pegeen's wasted culinary efforts. He voiced the latter to Ellen when, coming downstairs before his hostess, he met the woman in the hall.

"Don't be worryin' about Peg, sir," she said reassuringly. "She's used to irregular doin's and she'll just give your dinner for supper—the way that there'll be nothin' to do but warm things up and set them on. It'd be a shame—you to be goin' and dinner ready here."

She looked toward the stairway and added, in a low voice:

"And it's I that'll be glad to see Miss Nora sittin' down with one of her own kind—and her what she is, and everybody crazy about her before, and all the fine clothes and visitin' and travellin' and all——"

"But she's very happy, here, isn't she?" the man asked gently.

"Oh, she's happy. It's her that has the trick of happiness, but she's the lonely days and thinkin' long's the weary work. There's good people here, but none of them talk her own talk, sir. It'd be well enough for a bit in the summer, but winter and summer, in and out—it don't seem right. If you could have seen how it was in the old days, sir—and now only that daft John and me to do for her, and she so cheerful and never a word of regret or wishin'."

There was sorrow and pride and great love in the

plain old Irish face, and Archibald realised that he was being honoured. Ellen was not the woman to talk of her mistress to any chance comer.

There was a step in the upper hall, and the servant vanished into the dining-room, whilé Archibald went forward to meet a vision in white linen, smooth-haired, immaculate, laughing-eyed.

"Soap and water couldn't revive my collar," he said apologetically, "but my hands and face are approximately clean."

"You're very, *very* beautiful," said the Smiling Lady. "What's a collar, between gardeners!"

He came around to the matter of neighbouring again, while they sat at dinner.

"It's as new to me as gardening," he confessed —"this getting interested in the people who live round about me and having them take an interest—approving or otherwise—in me. I can't quite make up my mind whether I like it or not. Just at the first jump, I'd say I didn't. Theoretically it's a nuisance. Down in New York, I didn't care a hoot whether the chap in the bachelor quarters across the hall from mine lived or died or drank himself into d-t's or gavé temperance lectures or wore tweeds or pink velvet tights, and I'd have resented his being curious about me. But up here—well, everything's different. I fairly lap up Peg's flow of information about the Valley folk and I'm absorbingly interested in the amount of Mrs Frisbie's egg money, and in Bill Briggs's habits and in Ezra Watts's bad reputation. I'm thirsting to meet Ginsy Shalloway, and I'm Mrs Neal's humble admirer. What's more, I've an amazing desire to make myself solid with them all. Queer, isn't it? I suppose it's mostly Pegeen —Pegeen and you. You two make a fascinating sort of talisman of human sympathy. Along came grey days and stupid people. You rub your magic ring—and the world's an interesting place, and

living in it is glorious business. Makes a chap feel like humping himself and going shopping for magic rings."

Nora Moran dimpled at him approvingly across the bowl of June roses that stood in the centre of the table. Spicy pink and white, old-fashioned garden roses they were. It occurred to Archibald that they rhymed with the face beyond them as no hot-house flowers could have rhymed with it. For one foolish, inconsequent moment he tried to imagine himself buying orchids for this garden girl. He had bought many orchids. Women liked them because they were so expensive, but for the Smiling Lady——

He came back from the Fifth Avenue flower shops to the June roses and the girl beyond them.

"You're coming on rapidly," she was saying. "It isn't everyone who could discover neighbouring and gardening all in one short June. Some people never discover either of them—poor souls. That's why the yellow journals have scandals enough and tragedies enough to keep them going. But if you've got it in you to garden—and to neighbour—Oh, I've great hopes of you. Peggy will make something of you yet."

"And there aren't any scandals and tragedies in the country?" he asked lightly.

A shadow crept into the girl's smiling eyes.

"But there are—dreadful ones sometimes—and they seem even more dreadful up here than they do in town because each one stands out so stark and ugly against the beauty all round about it. I had frightfully heartachey times when I first began to find the sordid, ugly things growing along with the loveliness in this quiet country place—jealousies and feuds and slovenliness and vulgarity and cruelty and worse—but I worked my way through those heartaches—or at least I learned to understand and

be tolerant. The weeds grow with the flowers everywhere, I guess. And it's so easy to think too much about your neighbour's business when you haven't anything else to entertain you, and to magnify little slights and offences when you haven't more important things to occupy your mind. And it's hard to live up to standards when there's no one to appreciate —and natural beauty doesn't give you much joy, if you've always been doing hard, grinding work in the midst of it. Gracious! I only wonder that most of the country folk are such plumb dears as they are."

"But they garden and neighbour," prompted Archibald.

"They don't." She was too much in earnest to be polite. "You don't think raising vegetables and knowing everybody for miles around are gardening and neighbouring, do you? Not a bit of it. You've got to put your heart into the garden and the people if you're going to do real gardening and neighbouring. When you get around to that, you've learned how to be happy most of the time and contented all of the time. I used to think that nine-tenths of the people I met were uninteresting, but I've found out that, all the time, there weren't any uninteresting people. There were only people I hadn't *got at*."

Archibald shook his head doubtfully. "Short of using a pickaxe or an auger—" he demurred. He was thinking of some of the men and women he had known.

The girl laughed.

"Aren't they *awful*—that kind? But there are more of them in town than in the country. There really are—more in proportion to numbers, I mean. I don't mean for a minute that I've got at everybody up here in the Valley but, accidentally or by main force, I've broken through some such hard shells and with such surprising results that I'm beginning

to have a comfortable conviction about what's inside of the very toughest human crust, if one could only get through to it. Now there's Ezra Watts. He lives just a little way from here up the back road—much too near for the welfare of my chickens and fruit and vegetables. I've an idea he even milks my cows. He's one of my failures and nobody in the Valley doubts that he's bad all the way through. I have awful misgivings myself sometimes, but in my optimistic moments I still contend that there's a decent scrap of soul hidden away somewhere in Ezra—hidden so thoroughly that even he doesn't suspect it's there."

"I feel strangely drawn to Ezra," Archibald murmured gravely.

The Smiling Lady flashed back a challenge.

"Why don't you take him on?" she asked. "I've fumbled the thing. Maybe what he needs is man talk. It's a long chance, but there's really something very sporty about soul hunting."

There was a mirthful ring even to her sentiment. She talked of souls as she might have talked of kittens or puppies or marigolds. From that angle, talk of souls did not seem the indelicate or embarrassing thing it is taken for by the average person not professionally concerned with soul culture or soul saving.

"I'm willing to warn you, though," she conceded generously, "that Ezra needs disinfecting as much as he needs moral suasion. Nobody will ever burrow through to his soul until he's had a bath."

VI

IT was late in the afternoon when Archibald turned up at the shack, and Pegeen, arrayed in one of the cheapest of the new frocks and very dressy as to hair ribbons and shoes, came down the path to meet him.

"It was a shame for them to scare you off so you didn't even come home to dinner," she said indignantly, "but you needn't have been afraid. I shooed them all away at half-past eleven; they had to go home and get their own dinners anyway."

"I wasn't afraid of my neighbours. I was gardening for one of them."

For a moment she looked puzzled. Then she knew.

"Miss Moran! Well, if she isn't the greatest! She could make *any*body garden; was it flowers or vegetables?"

"Beans."

"Too bad," said Peg, regretfully. "Of course it's all nice and exciting and like helping God with his chores, but flowers seem best. They're so perfectly lovely when they come up and blossom—but then, I love string beans, don't you? Only they're just green and I think it's more fun to help make something bright coloured."

"Did you ever have a garden of your own?" Archibald asked. They had reached the shack now and he dropped down on the doorstep and filled his pipe. Pegeen sat down beside him, after carefully turning up the abbreviated skirt of her new dress.

"No use dirtying it any faster than I have to," she explained. "Every washing takes it out of them

even when they aren't pink. No, I never had a garden—what you'd call a real garden. We never had much garden. Sometimes Dad would put in corn or potatoes but mostly he forgot; and if he didn't forget them, he did after he'd put them in, and I didn't have much time to take care of them. I had some poppies once though, perfectly wonderful poppies. Miss Moran gave me the seeds. I hadn't ever planted any flower seeds at all till one day I was down at her house and she was working in the flower garden and let me help. I sowed some seed of those great big blue larkspur—delphiniums she calls them, but I think larkspur's nicest, don't you?—and some poppies too. Poppies have got the cunningest baby seeds that you don't dare cover up warm at all for fear you'll choke them to death. She let me take some poppy seed home, and I dug a place right outside Mother's window. She was sick then, you know, and after the poppies blossomed, I used to get Mother up every single day to see them. They were the gladdest, brightest, danciest things, but they used to make Mother sort of sad sometimes."

She sat quiet for a few moments, looking out with wistful eyes toward the far hills, and Archibald laid a large hand over the two small ones clasped in her lap. The sober little face flashed a quick response. Happiness was always knocking at the door of Pegeen's heart even when sorrow housed there.

"My poppies down at Miss Moran's were nice too," she went on, "but I was awfully disappointed about my larkspur. It didn't bloom a bit that summer, and Miss Moran had said it would be blue, and I like blue best of anything, don't you? It isn't so bright as red, but it's such a way-deep-down-glad colour. Well, that fall, Miss Moran had me move the larkspur plants over by the lily bed; and one day the next summer, when I hadn't been

up there for weeks, John came after me with the horse and said Miss Moran wanted me in a hurry. I was afraid she was sick, but she wasn't. She just grabbed me when I got there and said:

"'Peggy O'Neill, you've been working miracles. Come along quick and see them.'

"So we held hands and raced to the garden and there were my larkspurs all blossoming—a great big patch of them with white lilies cuddling up close to them! Blue? Why, you never saw anything bluer. I looked at them and my legs went wobbly and I flopped right down and cried. Yes, sir, honestly I did. I couldn't stand having helped God make anything so beautiful. He was used to it but I wasn't. Isn't it wonderful that He could think of so many perfectly splendid things to make in seven days? There's no telling what He'd have done, if He'd taken a year to do it. Did you ever try to think of something more that would have been awfully nice and that He could have done if He'd taken more time? I've tried lots of times, but I never could. It seems as if He hadn't forgotten a thing.

"I've never felt the same about myself since I helped Him with those larkspurs. They bloom every summer, and every time I see them, I feel as if I'd made a piece of sky. You get Miss Moran to let you plant some larkspur in her garden. You won't ever feel real downhearted and discouraged about yourself afterwards. I do think a flower garden's the sweetest thing. I wish we had one."

"Why don't we have one?" asked Archibald.

Pegeen looked at him doubtfully, saw determination in his face, and fairly crowed for joy.

"Out in front and along the path! Poppies and bachelor buttons and marigolds and lots of things that'll bloom quick—and then larkspur and phlox and lilies to bloom next summer."

Her exultant voice suddenly wavered and dropped, and the joy died out of her.

For a moment the man did not understand. Then he looked ahead and saw the end of the summer's trail. Oddly enough he too shrank from the vision.

"I'm coming back, Peg," he promised quickly. "I'm surely coming back. The heart of the world is up here among the hills, I believe, and there's nothing to keep me away."

She smiled again then—but a misty little smile.

"I just thought—all of a sudden—" she explained falteringly. "A summer's so short and I'm being so happy—and it's half-past June already."

"That's why we must hurry with our garden." There was a sympathetic mist in the man's own eyes, but he resolutely dragged the talk away from sentiment. It's a way men have.

"We'll plant all sorts of splendid things and the Smiling Lady will teach us to work miracles," he said.

"She'll give us loads of baby plants. She loves starting new gardens." Pegeen was cheerful again now. He had said he would come back and it was easy for her to believe in happiness.

"To-morrow I'll dig the beds," promised Archibald. "Now tell me what the neighbours thought of your new finery."

Pegeen was all excitement.

"They couldn't believe it. They honestly couldn't. Ginsy Shalloway'll talk herself to death about them, and Mrs Frisbie said that either you were cracked or just a natural spendthrift, and Mrs Neal spoke right up and said you were a big-hearted young gentleman, that's what you were; and I hugged her for it and they're all crazy to know what you get paid for your pictures, and I said maybe you'd let me take you to see them only maybe not, because you had lots of painting to do and couldn't let

visiting interfere. So you don't have to go if you don't want to."

"But I do want to, Peg. I'm going to garden and to neighbour. I'm credibly informed that there's the road to being happy most of the time and contented all the time. I'm going to send to town for a horse of mine that's eating his head off in the stables, and we'll rent a cart, and then we can neighbour fast and furiously all up and down the Valley."

"Oh, my stars!" crooned Pegeen, in ecstasy.

"Can you ride your horse?" she asked suddenly.

"That's what he's for, chiefly. Why?"

"Well, I just thought maybe you'd lend him to Miss Moran when you weren't neighbouring. She loves riding better than anything and she had a beautiful riding horse when she came, but he hurt himself jumping the pasture fence and died, and she couldn't afford to get another. She's the loveliest thing on horseback—but, do you know, she rides straddle just like a boy and she wears breeches and sometimes they show; folks here thought it was awful at first. They buzzed around to each other's houses like a swarm of bees, talking about it, and they thought maybe Mr Colby, the minister, ought to take it up. And he wouldn't. He said she didn't go to his church, and that anyway it wasn't a thing for a single man to take up with a young lady. So then they thought the ladies' aid would have to do something, but they sort of put it off, and then Mr Frisbie went to Boston to spend a week with his rich brother that's a minister in a big church there. He came back telling that the parks up there were simply full of ladies riding straddle and that his brother's wife said all the richest and properest ladies wore breeches when they rode and that it was countrified to be shocked. So then everybody quieted down. Mrs Neal says Ginsy

Shalloway sent for a pattern for riding breeches, but I don't believe she's ever had a call for it."

Archibald, who had been chuckling over the Valley's consternation, had an inspiration.

"Peggy," he said, "I wonder if Mrs Neal could stable two horses for me. You and I are going to do our neighbouring behind a pair—but remember, Peg, I never heard that the Smiling Lady rode. That extra riding horse is going to be a lucky accident. Incidentally, I'm going to teach you to ride him."

"Oh, my stars!" The small girl crooned it again, from heart fullness. "And I didn't even pray for you to come! If I could have thought of anything as nice as you, I'd have prayed for it, but I couldn't. So I just said 'God bless me' and I guess He thought that meant sending you."

"God bless you, Peg," Archibald said very softly. He couldn't remember having asked God to bless anyone, since far away bedtimes in which a very small boy and a very loving mother and a certain little white bed in a cheerful nursery figured hazily. Come to think of it, he hadn't been on speaking terms with God at all, since those old days; but here in the Happy Valley one met Him at every turn and He seemed very friendly.

The dinner missed at noon was, according to Nora's prophecy, warmed up for supper; and after it was eaten and the dishes had been washed Archibald walked down to Mrs Benderby's with Pegeen, because she was later than usual and the shadows were black.

As the two passed out of the meadow, they found Mr and Mrs Neal standing in the middle of the road in front of their home, talking excitedly and looking down toward Pisgah, where a red glow lighted the sky from behind a crouching black hill.

"What's up?" Archibald asked. "Oh, I see —fire. What do you think it is?"

"Another barn, I guess," Mr Neal said grimly. "From the looks, I should say 'twas Frisbie's. Getting past a joke, this thing is. Makes a man feel darned uncomfortable when he goes to bed. Something's got to be done. That's the fifth."

"Fifth what?"

"Fifth barn burning! Set on fire every one of 'em. Nobody suspected at first, but the fires began coming along too regular to be accidental and then there were signs of the work found, but they ain't been able to catch the fire-bug. He don't seem to steal anything—crazy, most likely. Just likes to watch the things burn, but there's been a big loss and one house went too, and folks are mighty stirred up about it. I don't feel none too easy myself. There's no telling where the thing'll hit next."

"Had detectives on the job, I suppose?" said Archibald.

"Oh, yes, the town got a couple of 'em up here. Ate everything within sight and looked wise and got nowheres. They sort of suspected Ezra Watts, but, jumping Jerusha, everybody else had thought of that before they did. That's the first rule up here when anything goes wrong. Suspect Ezra. He's a good deal of a pill, Ezra is, and I don't put much past him in the way of meanness, but I can't say as I held him accountable for the drought last year or for my horses having pink eye this spring. I've got a leaning toward proof, and there ain't a ghost of proof against Ezra in this barn business—except just his general cussedness and that he thinks he's got a grudge against the Valley folks—but I'm kind of afraid some of the young fellows'll handle him rough, without asking for proof, if this barn burning keeps up. When Nick Bullard and Lem Tollerton and that crowd get a drink or two aboard, they don't set much store by law and order. I kind of figure that this would be

a healthy time for Ezra to visit somewheres without waiting to be invited."

"You don't mean that they'd really harm him?" Archibald said incredulously.

"Well, as I said, there's just a few of the boys that ain't strong on law and order, when they're full of liquor 'n' animal spirits 'n' have what they'd call a good cause. Of course the rest of us would stop them if we got wind of their deviltry in time, but we generally don't and then when it's over there's nobody wants to run them down and jail them because everybody knows their families and neighbours are with them. Last time they made trouble they beat up a peddler that had been cheating all the women. Can't say he didn't deserve a licking, but the boys overdid it and got considerable of a scare themselves. Thought they'd killed the fellow.

"Ma and I took him in and nursed him up and turned him out all right. He did talk some about suing for assault and all that, but, shucks, how'd he know who to sue? The boys wore masks. He was some scared too, and so he went off as soon as he was able—and glad to go. Glad to have him go, we were. You've got to do your duty, but I must say I ain't strong on Samaritaning when the hurt party's as low down a skunk as that peddler was.

"The boys ain't been taking any law into their hands since that, but the whole neighbourhood's so stirred up over this fire-bug——"

"Stop borrowing trouble, Pa," Mrs Neal interrupted. "Nice idea of his neighbours you'll be giving Mr Archibald. You're getting as nervous as a tadpole over this barn business."

"Too nervous to put up a pair of horses for me, if I send for them?" inquired Archibald laughingly, but Mr Neal's face was serious as he answered.

"At your own risk. I'll be glad to take them but you'd better insure them."

Archibald met Mrs Benderby for the first time that night. She was sitting on the porch as he and Peg turned in at the gate, and, rising from her chair, came forward to meet them.

"This is Mr Archibald," Pegeen announced with an air of proud proprietorship.

The woman gave him a thin cold hand. The chill of it made him peer more closely at her through the starlit gloom, but he could see her face only in dim outlines. Scanty hair brushed smoothly back from the forehead and fastened in a tight knob at the back of the head left hollow temples in view and below them Archibald made out sunken cheeks and the angles of a sharp chin. But it was the woman's figure that emphasised most clearly the chill of the bony hand. Even in the starlight, the sunken chest and rounded shoulders, the sagging droop of the whole body told their tale of hard work and physical unfitness and utter weariness.

"I'm glad to meet you," Mrs Benderby was saying. "Peg's told me how wonderful good you've been to her and I think a sight of Peg. I'd ought to."

There was weariness in the voice too, yet it strove for a brisk cheerfulness that was evidently its natural note.

Something tugged suddenly at Archibald's heart-strings. Life was too hard for women.

"Yes; you and I couldn't do without Pegeen," he said. The friendly warmth of his voice affected the tired little woman as had the warm strength of his hand-clasp. There *was* something about Peg's Mr Archibald, she admitted to herself—something that cheered one up a bit. That "you and I" had a folksy sort of ring. He wasn't stuck up if he did come from New York.

She smiled in the dark and though he could not see the smile he heard it in her voice.

"When you get used to having Peg around, nothing goes right without her," she said. "Seems as if she always knew what you needed or wanted before you did. She spoils people, Peg does—gets 'em so they can't live alone and most of us has to live alone sooner or later—even when there's plenty of folks living in the same house with us."

Archibald nodded. He had lived alone "with plenty of folks" and he knew what she meant.

"Won't you sit down, sir?" Mrs Benderby asked. "We'll go indoors if you say, but it's kind of cool and restful out here in the dark. I like being in the dark, evenings. You can't see things you'd ought to get up and do."

She had dropped into her rocking chair again and Archibald sat down on a broken-backed bench, while Pegeen went into the house. He could hear her bustling about in the kitchen and humming a gay tune as she worked.

"Ain't she the cheerfulest thing?" Mrs Benderby said, after a quiet moment in which she too had been listening to the quick, light steps and the rollicking tune. "Seems as if, as soon as she's around, I feel rested. You just can't slump down when Peg's boosting you. Even thinking about her's better than medicine. Some days when I ain't my best and the work don't go good, I hang on to the thought of Peg as if 'twas a patent life-preserver. Funny, ain't it—a little scrap of a big-eyed thing like her! She ain't exactly pretty, Peg ain't, but I think the angels must be some like her."

"I shouldn't wonder," Archibald agreed. He could understand why Pegeen had felt that she must go over and see to Mrs Benderby. He felt strongly impelled to see to her himself—and he smiled as it occurred to him that perhaps he was really neighbouring.

"You must put your heart into the gardens and

the people," the Smiling Lady had said. Well, he seemed to be putting his heart into Mrs Benderby. Something ought to be done about her, something even more than Pegeen was doing. He didn't like the remembrance of that clammy hand or the ache of weariness in the voice that held no trace of complaint or bitterness.

"You and Peg and I will have to look after each other a little," he said later as he rose to go. "Of course I know that Peg could see to both of us competently with one hand tied behind her, but you and I will get into the game for our own sakes. I'm going to depend upon you to advise me about the child. Women understand such things better than men."

"I'd be proud to help," she said eagerly.

It seemed to him that the hand she gave him in good-night had a thrill of warmth in it and that the bent shoulders had straightened just a little.

"Good-night, Peg," he called through the open door.

The small girl came running out.

"I was just getting ready for morning," she explained. "Mrs Benderby has to go off real early, and anyway I thought it'd be nice for you and her to get acquainted without me there.

"It was awfully good of you to bring me home. I wasn't afraid—not really—only it's so comfortable not to have to be not afraid. Good-night."

And as he went through the gate, she called again.

"Good-night. I'll be up to you early."

Archibald walked home with the friendly, childish voice ringing in his ears and in his heart an unaccountably fervent thankfulness that she surely would be "up to him early." Morning—even a June morning—wouldn't be a cheerful thing with Pegeen away.

VII

THE next day was a momentous one at the shack. Archibald and Pegeen started their garden and Wiggles was taken into the family. The garden came along according to plan but Wiggles was accidental. Peggy brought him with her when she arrived in the morning and the first intimation of his presence came to Archibald with a request for an antiseptic bandage.

"I saw you had some in your trunk, and it's time for you to get up anyway," Peggy called through the bedroom door.

"Are you hurt?" he asked in alarm.

"No, I'm all right. It's a dog. I guess it was an automobile. Anyway its leg's hurt."

The explanation was hardly lucid but Archibald gathered that first aid measures were being taken for the dog not for the automobile.

"Wait a minute and I'll help," he said as he passed a roll of bandage through the partly opened door.

"It'd only spoil your breakfast." She was serious but practical. "I can do it. I've done it to lots of things. There's peroxide on the mantel and he's as patient as can be."

When Archibald, shaven and dressed, left his room a half hour later, there were no signs of casualty and Pegeen was as serene as usual.

"He's all fixed," she said. "It wasn't so terribly bad, but he couldn't walk and of course I couldn't leave him down there."

"Of course not," agreed Archibald

But after breakfast, as she led him out to see the cripple, a shade of anxiety crossed her face.

"He isn't a handsome dog," she warned—"not exactly handsome, but he'll be real cute when I've washed him—and he won't be a bit of trouble to you. I'll keep him in the shed and I'll——"

"Piffle, Peg!" interrupted the man rudely. "We needed a dog."

The dirty, shaggy little beast lying on a pile of burlap in the shed was not handsome. Pegeen had spoken within bounds. Mongrel was written large on him, but a strain of Airedale, albeit with a bar sinister across it, gave his ugliness a redeeming dash of distinction, and when two beseeching, friendly brown eyes met Archibald's and the whole dog from sniffing nose to frantically wagging tail, wiggled propitiation, the man took the new-comer into the family with something like enthusiasm.

"He's *not* handsome, Peg," he agreed, "but he's a jolly little chap. We'll call him Wiggles."

A day or two later, Archibald coming home from a morning's painting found Pegeen with something on her mind.

After a little it came out.

"Do you like kittens, Mr Archibald?" she asked with elaborate casualness.

"Oh, so-so." He was absorbed in cleaning his pipe.

"I think it's awful to drown them, don't you?"

He caught the note of anxiety in her voice and looked at her quickly.

"Miss Moran does too," she urged in defence of her position. "Maybe she'd take it if you don't want me to have it, but I'd like to doctor its eyes first. It'll be lovely when its eyes are well—and the boys had a piece of fish line and a stone. They thought it was fun. I flew right at Benny Crocker and slapped him—as hard as ever I could—and he was so surprised he dropped the kitten and then I

grabbed it up—and I always did want to slap Benny anyway. If I'd been a boy I'd have licked him long ago and I don't see why being a girl—only of course long hair's handy to pull—but they didn't get a chance to-day. I can run as fast as any boy, if I do have skirts. It's grey with one white paw. I think you'd like it, if its eyes weren't sore. I'm putting boric acid in them. That's what the doctor gave Mrs Neal for hers when they were red and hurt her and she loaned me some."

"What does Wiggles say about it?" Archibald asked gravely.

Pegeen giggled.

"I wouldn't dare tell you," she said. "He swore. Honestly he did—dog swearing anyhow—but when he found I liked the kitten, he quieted down and now he just laughs when the spunky little thing spits at him. I do love a dog that has a long nose so he can laugh, don't you? I wouldn't have one of those snub-nosed, sulky-looking dogs for anything—unless it was sick or something and needed to be taken care of."

"Oh, Peg, Peg! Are we going to take care of all the halt and maimed and blind?"

She looked at him thoughtfully. "Well, they aren't all likely to come along our way and anyway I won't have any more here if you hate it; but you see I always did—and I can't leave them alone at Mrs Benderby's all day and so I—but of course we won't have any more here if it bothers you—just Wiggles and Spunky. I thought we'd call the kitten Spunky. She's so little and she stands up to Wiggles as if she were his size. I sort of think that kitten's Irish."

"Bless you, child, I don't mind running a foundling asylum. Why should I? I'm one of the foundlings and I'm as grateful to you as Wiggles and Spunky ever can be."

She looked at him soberly for a moment and then she smiled. There was something extra special about Pegeen's smile. A hint of it was not always playing about her lips and eyes as the elusive promise of smiles always lurked in Nora Moran's face. The child's sensitive mouth and great dark blue eyes were profoundly serious much of the time—quietly happy but serious for all that. When the smiles came, they flashed out suddenly, radiantly, a surprise, an illumination, a wave of gaiety rippling from brow to chin and overflowing the whole child. Even her hair ribbons seemed to quiver with it, her short skirts to swish with mirth, her slim little feet to move to dance tunes.

To see it once was to want more of it.

"Making you happy is sheer, wanton self-indulgence, Peg," Archibald said as he studied her face. "I'll not acquire merit by anything I do to set you smiling. That's sure."

She did not understand but that made no difference. He often talked over her head, but words were unimportant. The essential thing was that he should be pleased with her and he was. She could see that. Moreover, he wasn't prejudiced against stray kittens.

"But I won't show her to you until her eyes are better," she said wisely. "A smashed leg like Wiggles' is sort of interesting when it's all bandaged up, but you've got to love a thing considerable much not to mind sore eyes. If I ever get sick and stay sick a long time, I do hope it'll be a nice, clean, interesting kind of sickness—but what I'd like best would be to be sitting out in the sunshine feeling happy and then just not to be there—like Mr Benderby. It was hard on Mrs Benderby, but wasn't it perfectly lovely for him? Out under the big apple-tree he was, and it was all in bloom and there were orioles nesting in it. I think that was wonderful, don't you? I'd have liked that for Mother—

only it was so lovely for me to have a chance to take care of her. I guess that's why God doesn't let everybody go in beautiful ways. He knows they're going to be so happy in a little while that having been sick won't count and He lets them go the hard way so that the people who love them and are going to have to stay on without them can have the comfort of taking care of them."

"That's one way of looking at it," said Archibald.

They were occupying their favourite seat on the doorstep now. Pegeen's elbows were on her knees, her hands cupping her chin, her eyes gazing out across the Valley.

"What do you think souls look like, Mr Archibald?" she asked suddenly.

Archibald considered the subject and acknowledged that he had no theories on it.

"Well, I've thought about it lots," Peg said cheerfully. Her discussions of life, death and immortality were always imperturbably cheerful. Nothing morbid touched her. Life was a fact and death was a fact and immortality was a fact. They were all vastly interesting. Why not wonder about them and talk about them?

"I think most people have a horrid idea about souls, don't you?" she said. "Sort of foggy, lonesome things that go floating around trying to be happy when they haven't got anything to be happy with. Honestly, that kind of souls would have just about as good a time in heaven as Bill Briggs does at grange parties. They don't have liquor and he says he isn't built for conversation. I think heaven's going to be heaps cosier than the ministers say. I'm counting on having legs and hands and eyes and nose and everything, just the way I have here, only no aches or freckles or anything, and only beautiful things to feel and see and smell—and stacks of little child angels to see to, so that we won't miss having

the old people and sick people to take care of. I'm expecting to enjoy heaven and if I do it'll have to be mighty different from the way they tell about it."

"I know a job in heaven that would suit you," Archibald said, "but another angel has it. Maybe he'd take you on to help."

"Tell me," she urged eagerly.

"Well, it's in the Japanese heaven; but I suppose we'll all be talking the same language when we get over there so that won't shut you out. There's a Japanese angel—Jizo, they call him—and he puts in his whole time playing with the souls of the little children that come to heaven, so that they won't be lonesome for their mothers."

"Oh, my stars!" The small girl was all aglow. "What a bee-autiful job! Wouldn't it be cunning to see—all those blessed little baby souls playing around and that big kind angel making up games for them and seeing to them for God? But one angel couldn't do it—not possibly. Maybe he could when the world started and there weren't many children going to heaven, but now he'd have to have somebody else. Oh, I do hope he'll let me help. That's the most interesting thing I ever heard about heaven. Mostly it sounds stupid, but I always did think God would be too sensible to let us all sit around and rest for ever. I wonder if that Jizo thought up his job for himself and asked for it or if God just gave it to him. Mr Frisbie says the Japanese are awfully smart but that they're ruining wages—only I don't suppose they bother about wages in heaven. I wouldn't want wages."

Archibald rose and stretched himself, laughing down at the earnest little face upturned to him.

"I'm willing to bet your month's wages here that you'll be given a chance to take care of somebody in heaven," he said. "They say the seraphim are

for adoration and the cherubim are for service. Well, I can see you chumming with the cherubs."

Pegeen looked perturbed.

"Miss Moran has pictures of them," she said doubtfully. "They aren't anything but heads and wings."

"That's the painters' fault. They couldn't imagine anything as beautiful as a cherub so they gave up before they got fairly started."

The small girl on the doorstep nodded understanding and relief.

"You need legs and hands if you're going to do much," she said, "and if I don't set mine going you won't have any supper."

Wiggles and Spunky improved so rapidly under expert treatment that bandages and boric acid were speedily put aside and the two new members of the household were promoted from obscurity to family intimacy.

A crow with an injured wing, and a squirrel rescued at the eleventh hour from Wiggles, and two fluffy yellow chickens whose hysterical mother had tramped on them during a panic over a temporary scarcity of worms, were at various times added to the family group, but the crow and the chickens and the squirrel were merely transients. Once repaired, they went back to the wild life and Mrs Neal's chicken yard, though Peterkin, the crow, came back occasionally to sit on the birch-tree by the kitchen door and caw at Peg; and Jabberwok, the squirrel, had a nest in a near-by oak from which he threw acorns at Wiggles with unerring aim.

Boots was a transient too, but he did not need bandaging or doctoring and he stayed on as a day boarder for a long time.

Archibald almost stumbled over him one day as he came through the woodshed after an early morning fishing excursion with Jimmy Dawes. He had brought Jimmy home to breakfast and they came in

the back way, triumphantly waving creditable strings of trout.

A gurgle of appreciation sounded at Archibald's feet and he stepped back, hastily looking down into the round staring eyes of a fat baby who sat comfortably strapped into a pine box and held out chubby hands toward the shining fish.

"Well, I'll be—" began the man. Then he remembered Jimmy, and left the remark hanging in the air unfinished.

"Hello!" commented Jimmy. "Going in for baby farming?"

"Peg!" Archibald's voice held alarm and protest. It brought Pegeen out from the kitchen, frying pan in hand.

"Hello, Jimmy! Going to stay for breakfast? My, what a lot of fish!"

Suddenly she saw the question in Archibald's face and her glance followed his to the occupant of the box.

"Oh, yes," she explained. "That's Boots—Mrs McKenzie's Boots. His mother's sick and there isn't anybody except old Granny McKenzie and she can't possibly do everything and take care of Boots too. I ran over there this morning to see how sick Mrs McKenzie was and everything was a mess and the poor old lady was most crazy. I'd have stayed, only of course there's you; so I helped tidy things up and then I just brought Boots along with me. I knew you'd want me to. He won't be a mite of trouble. I never saw such a good baby. I can look after him here daytimes, and take him home with me nights. He's so cunning. Look at him laugh."

She dropped on her knees beside the box and waggled her head at the baby, who discarded his wide-eyed solemnity for a dimpling, gurgling hilarity that would have disarmed the most confirmed baby hater.

"What d'you guess Jizo'd think of *him*?" Peg asked enthusiastically. She was so happy in her new responsibility, so utterly confident of Archibald's readiness to share it with her, that the protest faded out of him. He stooped and experimentally poked at the baby's ribs with a fishy forefinger which Boots promptly grabbed, crowing in triumph as he held fast to it.

Something curious happened to the stooping man. He wasn't at all sure what it was but knew that it had to do with the feeling of that tiny hand curled round his finger. The hand was so absurdly small and soft and clinging. He had never noticed babies. People had them, but they had always seemed to him one of the necessary evils, mitigated in his own class by the existence of vigilant nurses who kept their charges out of sight and hearing.

He wouldn't have believed that there could be something extraordinarily pleasant about having a baby hang fast to one's forefinger and jump up and down with pride in the feat.

"Strong little beggar, isn't he?" he said with a shamefaced glance at Jimmy that bespoke masculine sympathy for his embarrassment. But Jimmy was used to babies.

"Jolly kid!" he said, swinging his string of fish toward the baby, who abandoned Archibald's finger to clutch at the slippery prize. "I'll fix the trout for you, Peg."

Archibald straightened up and looked at the boy admiringly. Nothing disturbed Jimmy's cheerful nonchalance—but then Jimmy had not a strange baby deposited, without warning, in his family circle. He would eat his breakfast and go home, but the baby, apparently, was to stay at the shack.

"What did you call him, Peg?" the alleged Head of the Family asked feebly.

"Well, his name's Bruce—after the spider man,

you know. The McKenzies are Scotch. But they call him 'Boots.' Baby talk's silly but I do think Boots is a nice funny little name, don't you?"

She went back to the kitchen with Jimmy, and Archibald followed, with a backward glance at the baby who resigned himself philosophically to the desertion and settled back among the pillows with the evident intention of going to sleep at once.

"Good old Boots!" murmured the man to whom philosophy had always come hard.

As he washed his hands at the kitchen pump, he eyed his forefinger with a whimsical smile. Queer little thing, a baby's hand. He could imagine that if the baby happened to be a man's own—after all, perhaps even neighbouring wasn't the last word. Human brotherhood was a big thing, but a man's own——

"D'you like them fried in corn meal, Mr Archibald?" called Pegeen.

He said that he did.

VIII

THE horses came from town and, though stabled by Mr Neal, were in a way additional members of the shack family.

"For a man who fled to the country to be alone, this is going some," Archibald said to himself, as for the first time he rode up the meadow path, leading a second saddled horse. Pegeen and Wiggles and Spunky and Boots and Peterkin—who was not yet well enough to respond to the call of the wild, were all on hand to welcome the new animals, and Archibald's eyes twinkled as he viewed the collection.

"This is where you take your first riding lesson, Peg. I'm going to put you on Zip," he said gaily. "Will the menagerie break loose if you take your eye off it? Suppose the baby should choke the pup and the pup should bite the cat and the cat should eat the crow?"

"They'll be good," promised Pegeen comfortably as she loosened the baby's strangle hold on the pup. "Aren't those horses splendid? I wonder how Susy feels about them. It's real hard on her, I think, having them come into her own barn, putting on city airs, and saying snippy things about farm horses and farm ways. I'll bet they do. They look that way—sort of proud and finicky and stuck up; but maybe the country'll do them lots of good. They're most certain to like Susy after they really get to know her. She's so sensible and nice."

"Sure thing," agreed Archibald. "Nothing like

living in the country for giving one a sense of values."

Peggy's face was flushed with excitement. Her lips and eyes were brimming with smiles as she waited to be tossed up to the saddle.

"I've been on Susy and on Mr Frisbie's Dick," she said, her voice trembling a little with eagerness, "but never on a real, prancy riding horse like Zip."

"Not afraid?" Archibald asked, noticing the quiver of the voice.

She looked surprised.

"Afraid? Me? Not a bit. Some way or other I always forget to be afraid of things till afterwards; but I'm so excited that my throat's all shirred up in puckers."

For an hour he taught her the laws of bit and bridle and saddle and horse nature; and she took to it all, as a duck takes to water, quick, fearless, bubbling over with joy.

"You'll make a horsewoman, Peg," Archibald said, as he lifted her down from the saddle at last. "I'll have you jumping fences, before the summer is over."

"Miss Moran used to. She'd make her horse jump anything. Mr Meredith and she didn't pay a bit of attention to fences—unless there was something they didn't want to trample down."

Archibald turned to her quickly.

"Meredith? Who's Meredith?"

Pegeen settled herself comfortably for a bit of gossip. She loved to tell Archibald about people. He was always so interested.

"Why, he's the one that's going to marry Miss Moran," she explained. "Anyway, that's what everybody thinks; but they don't seem to be in a very big hurry about it. He's awfully rich and he goes scooting off to Europe and around the world and everywhere; but he comes up here every summer

and stays a long while—over in Pittsfield. I guess he couldn't stand boarding anywhere around here. He looks as if he'd be real particular. But he comes over most every day in a motor car, and he and Miss Moran have perfectly beautiful times. He's lots older than she is—only I don't believe he's as old as his hair is. It's grey; but his face doesn't match it very well—except his eyes. Sometimes they look sort of old and sad. He's real handsome—and nice too; only he's nice in a proud way—not a bit like you. I couldn't ever see to him. I wouldn't suit—but he'd buy me anything I needed—if somebody'd tell him I needed it. I guess most rich people are like that. They want to be kind to poor folks, but they don't know how. I don't see how you ever found out exactly the right way. It isn't just giving money. It's being friends. Mr Meredith couldn't neighbour the way you do, no matter how hard he tried. Miss Moran takes him around to see folks and he's as nice and polite as can be; but everybody knows he's come just to please her and that he'll never come again unless she brings him. He gave the money for the free library down in Pisgah and he fixed up the schoolhouse, and when Joe Daniels got hurt last summer Mr Meredith had a big doctor come all the way from New York to mend Joe's back, and when the Potters were going to be put out of their house and hadn't a bit of money he paid off the mortgage and got Mr Potter a job over in Pittsfield—but he didn't do any of it for the Valley. He did it for Miss Moran. I'll bet he wouldn't know Joe Daniels or Mr Potter if he'd meet them on the road. So, you see, nobody bothers about being grateful to him. They're just grateful to Miss Moran. I suppose she's grateful to him, and that's all he wants; but I'd hate not to get more fun out of doing things for people than he does. I'd want to see them being happy because

I'd done the things, wouldn't you? My stars, but I do love to see people being happy, when it's my doings."

"What makes you think Miss Moran is going to marry him?" Archibald asked. He did not seem as interested in abstract discussions as he usually did.

"Why, anybody can see that he wants her to."

"And she?"

Pegeen thought it over.

"Well, I don't know that she wants to so very hard; but I guess she doesn't mind. He's so awfully good to her and she's known him for years and years and her father thought a heap of him—Ellen told me that—and you know it's nice and comfortable to have somebody looking out for you and loving you better than anything. Miss Moran gets lonesome sometimes. It's all right about neighbouring, but you do need somebody special—only it seems as if I'd like to be more excited about it, if I were going to marry anybody—and I'd want him younger. Grey hair's elegant looking; but I think a lover ought to have brown hair, don't you? Yellow wouldn't be as bad as grey; but I'd choose brown."

"Did Ellen tell you anything else about him?"

Pegeen shook her head.

"Nothing much. Ellen never does talk much; but I asked her one day whether Miss Moran had known Mr Meredith a long time and that's how she came to tell me about her father's thinking so much of him. I don't believe Ellen wants them to get married."

"Why not?" There was a note of eagerness in Archibald's voice.

"Oh, I don't know. She said he was a fine man and all; but that springtime was mating time; and then she folded up her lips the way she does when she doesn't like things."

Archibald dropped the subject, mounted his horse, and took Zip's bridle rein.

"I'm going over to see whether Miss Moran feels like riding," he said crisply. There was an aggressive air about him as he rode away, and Pegeen watched him with puzzled eyes until he disappeared around a bend in the road. Then she seated herself and tried to accommodate Boots and Wiggles and Spunky in her small gingham lap, all at one time.

"Wiggles," she said seriously, "I don't believe he liked it about Mr Meredith. No, sir; he didn't like it one bit. Do you suppose?—Oh, my stars, Wiggles, wouldn't it be lovely?" She patted Boots' back with an experienced hand until he had travelled far into Slumberland. Then she turned once more to the pup, who sat waiting with his head on one side and his intelligent brown eyes fixed on her face.

"Wiggles," she said, "you can bite Mr Meredith when he comes. I won't care."

The pup gave an ecstatic lunge and licked her cheek with his wet, red tongue. She laughed, as she wiped off the kiss.

"I was sure you'd *love* to bite him," she said approvingly, "only you'd better do it when he hasn't got that white bull terrier of his with him. Jimmy says it's a terrible fighter."

The Smiling Lady felt like riding. She felt so much like it that she sparkled in the most amazing way at the mere mention of it.

"Such beauties," she said, leaning across the porch railing to pat the horses. "And how fine for Peggy to learn to ride! She wasn't afraid, was she?"

"Afraid? Peg?" Archibald laughed the idea to scorn.

"Yes; that's so," agreed the Smiling Lady. "She's Irish. We're the reckless lot. It's only ourselves we've to fear. Just a few minutes, and I'll get my habit."

She ran upstairs and Archibald, waiting, heard her singing somewhere, gay lilting snatches of song that told of joy at the heart of her.

In ten minutes a slim boyish figure came out upon the porch. She was all in brown from the crown of her soft felt hat to the toes of her smart tan boots. The long coat had been made by a tailor who knew his business. The soft shirt and stock were eminently correct. She was well turned out, this young Amazon.

A light pressure of a boot in his hand and she was in the saddle. A moment more and they were off into the sweet of Summitland.

"I'll take you along the back road and up Witch Hill," she said. "It has the name of names for it, and how that ever happened I can't imagine. The loveliest places usually have the worst names. There's Hog Hill Road. It's a dream of loveliness, and how anyone ever had the heart to turn hogs loose on it! Of course they say it's the hog back shape of the hill that gave it its name, but when I ride there, even on the heavenliest day, I fancy I hear gruntings. Now Witch Road is all magic. It lives up to its name. There's a tradition that once upon a time an old witch lived in a little hut that's crumbling away beside the road at the hilltop. I've an idea she threw a spell over the whole hill and it lingers. There's Ezra Watts!"

"Good-morning, Mr Watts!"

A man, standing in the doorway of a dilapidated little house over whose forlornness a willow wept miserably, muttered an almost inaudible salutation. His weak, evil face did not lighten even for the Smiling Lady. Slouching, ragged, dirty, he stood in the sunshine like a blot on the summer day, and stared out at the riders sullenly from under a matted thatch of thick, straggling, black hair.

"Pleasant, friendly chap!" Archibald commented lightly.

The Smiling Lady sighed.

And then they forgot him, for they turned from the sunshiny back road, into an enchanted wood where a wide mossy trail wound gently, gently upward through shifting light and shade. Moist, pungent wood scents haunted the air. The gurgle of running water, insistent, mirthful, told that hidden among the ferns and mosses a brook followed the road companionably.

"It comes out into the open further up," the girl said as she listened, "but down here it hides just for the fun of the thing."

"A naiad's trick," Archibald suggested. "Probably there are fauns abroad."

"No; only the Little People," she corrected. "I'm all for Irish fairies myself. The poets and the artists and the mythology classes have taken the heart out of the Greek ideas, but the Celts—— Oh, well, we've had our own troubles with poets, but they haven't killed and stuffed all our gods and heroes and Little People yet. Father and I used to spend months in Ireland every year and I've heard such tales there—— Oh, such tales! I'd always the hope of seeing the Little People myself or of stepping off into the Green World, and finding my way to Tir'nan Og. Things like that seem so possible in Ireland, and some way or other Witch Hill is the same for me. It's full of shapes I can't quite see and voices I can't quite hear, and I look and listen and wait. I'm always excited up here. The wonderful thing might happen any moment. There are places like that, you know!"

She was talking lightly but there were dreams in her eyes.

Archibald's thoughts ran back to the girl of the puppies and kittens and babies in the birch wood, to the girl of the fireside confidence and the Irish love songs, to the gay, grubby girl of the vegetable

garden, to the girl of the June roses and the heart for neighbouring. Then he came back to the girl of the boyish clothes and the dreaming face who rode beside him up the Witch Way, listening and looking and waiting for the Wonderful Thing; and he too found it easy to believe in wonders. The enchanted wood was having its way with him.

Up and up they climbed. The road rose very gradually, winding its leisurely way through glades and glens, losing itself among pine shadows, loafing across sunlit clearings; and always at its side was the brook, whispering and chuckling and hinting at mysteries.

"It comes from a great spring at the very top of the hill beside the witch's cottage," the Smiling Lady said as she leaned to watch the sunlight playing over smooth brown stones beneath the liquid green of a fern-fringed pool.

"I usually lunch up there—and by the same token I've sandwiches in my pockets now. Nature worship's an appetising thing and Ellen knows it, but I didn't give her time to do her best to-day and it's a nuisance to carry more than sandwiches anyway. Supper will be waiting when we go home."

"You come up here often?" the man asked. Back of the question there was an eagerness, even a protest. It had occurred to him that Meredith and she had ridden up this way and lunched beside the Witch's Well; and there was something about the idea that he found unpleasant, most unpleasant.

"Oh yes, often," she was saying. "Or at least I did come when I had my horse. It's a long walk and the road isn't very practicable for driving. I've had beautiful days up here."

He could not ask with whom she had shared them and he assured himself stoutly that the matter was of no importance to him anyway—only, of course, a man whom Peg and Nora didn't like—— Personally,

he was altogether unconcerned. Oh, altogether—still he rather hoped she had not brought Meredith up Witch Way.

The road found the hilltop at last and wandered off inconsequently along the ridge; but the brook and the Girl and the Man stayed behind at the Witch's Well.

It lay cool and gleaming among moss-covered rocks. Little ferns and lush green grasses crept down between the rocks to peer into the water. A great old tree flung shadows down upon it. Under the tree a mossy cushion invited, promised.

The Smiling Lady slipped from her saddle before Archibald could reach her and dropped down beside the well with a sigh of content. When the man came back from tying the horses in the shade, she was leaning against the huge tree trunk, her hat thrown on the ground beside her—a Rosalind in ultra modern doublet and hose and fair enough to justify an Orlando in hanging verses on all the trees of the enchanted wood.

Pegeen had been quite truthful. "Sometimes they did show." For an instant a vision of the polite and embarrassed bachelor clergyman in Pisgah, of the perturbed ladies' aid society and the agitated Valley censors caused Archibald's lips to twitch nervously, but he smothered the smile at its birth and stretched himself out luxuriously on the moss at the neatly booted feet.

Even in riding breeches and boots she was more utterly without self-consciousness, more simply, adorably feminine than any other woman in muslin and blue ribbons. It would be blind virtue that could call the Smiling Lady immodest.

"I could have loved that witch," he said lazily, closing his eyes the better to feel the moss beneath his head and the breeze on his cheeks and to hear the drip, drip of water trickling among the rocks, and

then opening them hastily not to lose sight of the face against the background of rugged bark.

"I've felt that way myself," the girl confessed. "A woman who would come away up here into the quiet places and settle down with the forest at her back and the spring near her door and the whole Valley spread out before her eyes!

"It's a heavenly sweet place to sit on a summer's day, weaving spells, isn't it? They say she was old and ugly, but I think that was only when she went down among the Valley folk. Up here she must have been young and beautiful and she smiled a wonderful smile as she worked enchantment. I'm sure of it."

"It's believable," admitted the man who was watching her face. It was easy, astonishingly easy, for him to believe in a witch who was young and beautiful and who sat on a hilltop smiling and working enchantment.

They idled the afternoon away with talk and laughter and drowsy silences; and being very humanly hungry in the midst of all the glamour, they finally ate Ellen's six sandwiches and sighed for more.

"The next time," said the Smiling Lady, "we will bring a knapsack luncheon and make tea."

"The next time!" He liked the promise in it.

She rose to her knees and leaning over the spring cupped her hands and drank.

"You knew," she said seriously, looking back across her shoulder at Archibald, "that it's the Well at the World's End?"

"I guessed it," he said as seriously.

"And whoso drinks the nine drops shall win his heart's desire,
At the Well o' the World's End"

she quoted softly. Then she leaned towards him,

laughing, and touched his lips nine times with the cool wet forefinger of a dripping hand.

For one reckless moment, he was tempted to seize the daring hand, to hold it fast and kiss it, from pink finger tips to blue veined wrist. With any other woman he had ever known he would have dared it, with any other woman the thing would have been a challenge—but he looked into the laughing face so near him, and buried his hands in the moss beside him.

She was different. It was too much to risk—this blessed comradeship. He did not dare.

"Shall win his heart's desire," he echoed. "And if he does not know the desire of his heart?"

"One day he will learn it and then he will be glad of the nine drops from the Well o' the World's End."

Archibald closed his eyes and lay quiet, but there was tumult in his thoughts. In May he had been so sure that he knew the face of his heart's desire, had been mad with the beauty of it, hungered and thirsted for it, broken heart and spirit in pursuit of it. In May!—Now, in July, he could feel the cool touch of the nine drops from the Well o' the World's End without any stirring of the old longing, any throb of the old pain. The fever had died quite out of him and the face that looked at him from that far-away Maytime was beautiful—but not the face of his heart's desire.

The Happy Valley had done it. The Happy Valley and Pegeen and his Smiling Lady, and he was ashamed to have been so quickly cured, so light of love, yet glad with the gladness of one who wakens from long illness and pain and fevered dreams, to consciousness and peace and the face of a friend.

He opened his eyes and looked up at the Smiling Lady. "The face of a friend." The thought did not quite satisfy him. Friendship seemed lukewarm business for Witch Hill.

"I wonder," he said, "whether you are as understanding as you seem."

The laughter died out of her face. She looked at him with quiet eyes and waited. She was used to confidences, this girl whom the Valley loved and trusted.

"Could you understand a man's having made a fool of himself over a woman—all kinds of a fool—tossing aside his ideals and ambitions and hopes for love of her, letting her fool him to the limit—and then crawling away into hiding with his hurt and his bitterness?"

The Smiling Lady nodded gravely.

"Yes," she said; "I could understand that."

The man raised himself on his elbow and looked into the quiet eyes. There were incredulity, wonder, and something that was part shame, part gladness, and wholly boyish in his face.

"But if the man, after all his struggles and unhappiness, should suddenly find himself whole, clean quit of the pain and the desire, glad of life again and eager for happiness—could you understand that? This is a place for oracles. Read me the riddle. What is a man worth to whom that thing can happen?"

There was self-contempt in his voice, but pleading in his eyes. Perhaps, in her merciful heart, this Smiling Lady could find charity for a man who had wasted himself on a love that had not even the excuse of greatness.

"He is worthy of what he can win," the girl said gently.

"Nothing less Delphic than that for a man with the nine drops on his lips?" Archibald urged. She shook her head.

"There's no promise that the water will give him whatever he happens to want," she said. "He's to win his heart's desire; but he must prove that he

knows the one desire of his heart and is worthy of it, before it is given to him. That's the way I'd read the riddle."

He thought it over and nodded assent.

"That's fair—but when he has proved it?"

She sprang to her feet and stood looking out over the Valley.

"Then he will meet the Wonderful Thing," she said. She laughed as she said it, striving to put their talk back into the realm of whimsy; but her eyes were very sweet, and looking down into them the man, who had risen and stood beside her, had a vague glimpse of the Wonderful Thing coming to meet him along mysterious, enchanted ways.

They rode home through the sunset, and Archibald stayed for supper in the house among the maples, but after that moment on the hilltop, their talk was all of impersonal things. The girl led and the man followed. They discussed the advisability of draining the east meadow and the probable effect of spraying the cabbages with kerosene emulsion and the Valley's need of a social centre. Not for an instant was sentiment allowed to show its head, yet Archibald went back to the shack with a singing heart. He wakened the next morning with an odd sense of having journeyed in a far country and come back to a familiar world where all was not quite as it had been before his going; and, puzzling over the change, he came face to face with the truth. He was in love with the Smiling Lady. He had been in love with her ever since his first glimpse of her; but it had taken Witch Hill magic to clear the fog from his brain. He sprang from bed hastily, eager to be up and about, in a world new made; and Pegeen, in the kitchen, heard him whistling gaily as he dressed. The past clutched at him and he shook it off with a laugh. Ghosts were foolish, futile things—but his whistle ceased abruptly on a high

note as, looking eagerly into the future, he was confronted by a man with greying hair and tired eyes. He had forgotten Meredith; and, for a moment, the thought of him sluiced his warm happiness with chilling doubts; but he shook it off, too. Hadn't the nine drops touched his lips and wasn't he sure now, sure beyond possibility of mistake, that he knew his heart's desire?

His mood of exultant happiness lasted until he met Nora Moran again. Then its glad certainty wavered and doubts came creeping in; for things, in the prosaic Valley world, were not as they had been on Witch Hill. In some mysterious way, his lady had clothed herself in aloofness. It was not that she was not kind. There was nothing of which he could take hold, nothing of which he could demand an explanation. She was very friendly, very gracious, but the old intimacy was lacking and not, by any force or strategy, could he manage to see her alone. For some reason, she had gone within herself and gently closed the door; and, though he rebelled against her withdrawal, he was afraid he understood it. She had taken alarm, there beside the Witch's Well, had realised that he wanted more than friendship, and, being promised to another man—— Yes; that must be it. She was not free and she wanted to warn him in time, before there could be need of words, before he could give her face to his heart's desire and take the wrong road for happiness.

That was like the Smiling Lady. She was no cheap coquette. It was not in her to deal unfairly. If she had given her love, even if she had given only her promise to some one else, then she was doing only what a woman like her would do; and he must accept it as a man she could make her friend would accept it. Only—there was a chance that he was misreading her mood, that gossip was wrong, that Meredith was nothing more to her than an old

and dear friend. While there was a doubt, one might fight against exile.

In his perplexity he turned to Ellen. She had always shown her liking for him. She would tell him the truth, unless loyalty to her mistress forbade. One afternoon, when he had ridden up to the house among the maples only to be told that its lady was out and away somewhere, he spoke what was in his thought.

"What is it, Ellen?"

The old woman looked at him kindly with her shrewd, far-seeing eyes, but was non-committal.

"Sure, there's nothin', sir. Herself is away somewhere for a walk. She's fair set on roamin' these days."

He brushed evasion aside.

"Tell me, Ellen, if you can tell me without betraying confidence: Is Miss Moran engaged to this Mr Meredith of whom I hear?"

The homely Irish face softened to sympathy for an instant, then went back to its reserve.

"She is that, sir."

There were other questions burning his lips, but he forced them back. One does not ask a servant whether her mistress loves the man she means to marry.

"Thank you, Ellen," he said simply, as he turned away. He was in the saddle, when the woman who had stood watching him stepped to his side.

"'Twas her father's doin', God rest his soul," she said. Before he could answer, she had gone swiftly into the house.

Archibald rode away, repeating the words to himself. "'Twas her father's doin'." Now, why had she told him that? Did she mean him to understand that the girl's own heart was not in the marriage? Did she think that it lay in his power to interfere? Did she believe that her mistress cared more for him

than for the man she had promised to marry? For a moment or two, his heart beat high. Then again it was a leaden weight. The Smiling Lady was not to be swept off her feet by any lover. Since she had given her word to Meredith, perhaps to her father, too—— No; she would not listen, if he should plead; and, even if she would, there were things no fellow could do. He had never believed that all was fair either in love or in war.

It was Mrs Neal who brought him word of Meredith's arrival. She billowed into the shack one morning to borrow some coffee and settled into the largest of the chairs to rest and gossip, while Pegeen went after the coffee.

"Met Miss Moran's beau yet?" she asked. "No? Well, I guess he just come yesterday. They went by our house this morning and she stopped to ask about a ham I'd promised her. Pretty as a picture, she looked. Pinkish, soft sort of a veil around her head, and her cheeks pinker. They make a mighty handsome couple. I'll say that for them, even if he is a mite old for her. I should say he'd make a first-rate husband—kind as any woman could ask. You can see that in his face and in his ways, only he can't help being quiet and a little bit stiff—kind of like a pudding where you've used too much gelatine but got the flavour all right. John, that works down at Miss Moran's, told Neal last night that he'd heard they was going to be married this fall and go off to Egypt or some heathen place like that for the winter. I tell you, the Valley'll miss Miss Moran."

"Yes; she'll be missed," Archibald admitted.

"Peggy," he said, after their neighbour had gone away, "you'll have to keep me hard at my gardening and my neighbouring. It isn't going to be easy for me to be contented all the time."

"Yessir." There was a trace of anxiety in her ready smile. Something was wrong in his face and

voice and she was quick to notice it. "The garden doesn't need much now; but neighbours always need a lot. Shall we go and see the Kelleys this afternoon? He's up now; but he isn't well enough to work and she says she gets awfully lonesome and discouraged."

On their way to the Kelleys they stopped at the house under the maples. Archibald proposed it. He wanted to meet the man the Smiling Lady was going to marry; wanted to meet him and have done with it. When a dream refused to lie down decently and die of its own accord, the thing to do with it was to kill it, and the sooner the better.

So he and Pegeen made their call on the Smiling Lady, finding a warm welcome—and Richard Meredith, which was what Archibald had expected. He took the measure of the man, as he shook hands with him and, involuntarily, his hand tightened. This was a man. He liked the quiet manner, the quiet voice, the air of distinction, the refinement and strength of the mouth, the kindness in the eyes—but, as he noted the fine lines about the kind eyes and the grey hair above them, his heart cried out Ellen's protest. Springtime *was* mating time.

The Smiling Lady was quiet, too, that afternoon. She and Archibald talked together over the teacups, while Pegeen sat in the hammock with Richard Meredith—at his invitation; and the teacup talk of casual things was punctuated by gay little peals of laughter from the child and deeper answering laughter from the man beside her. They seemed to be getting on famously together, those two.

"Do you know," Pegeen announced to Archibald, when an hour later they rode away, "I honestly believe I could see to Mr Meredith after all. I never really talked to him before and he isn't a bit the way I thought he was. He isn't proud inside at all; and, if he wasn't going to marry Miss Moran, so

that he can't possibly need anything, I'd think he sort of needed seeing to. There's a lonesomey look in his eyes."

"That's better than a lonesomey feeling in his heart," Archibald said with a shade of bitterness in his voice. Meredith was all right; but he didn't care to hear Peggy praising him.

They turned into the back road as he spoke; and, far ahead, by the roadside, he saw a willow-tree mourning forlornly over a tumble-down cottage. A sudden whim seized him.

"Why don't you take him on?" the Smiling Lady had asked. Perhaps some very strenuous neighbouring would be good for this bitter mood of his.

IX

"PEG," Archibald said, "let's call on Ezra Watts."

She looked surprised, a bit doubtful, but her sporting blood rose.

"All right," she agreed promptly. "He won't let us neighbour and I expect the dirt's something terrible; but I'd just as soon."

As they dismounted in front of the cottage, Ezra's terrier came running out of the door. He was barking, but not angrily—urgently rather.

"You'd think he was inviting us in," Pegeen said, as she watched the dog run towards the door, come back to bark eagerly, and run forward again.

"More hospitable than his master, I should say," Archibald commented. "I wonder if the man is home."

They reached the door which stood partly open, and rapped on it.

No sound came from within. Archibald rapped again. The terrier ran through the opening and barked encouragement across his shoulder.

"I believe something's the matter," said Pegeen suddenly. "Let's go in."

She pushed the door open and before Archibald could stop her stepped inside. He followed her and they stood in a filthy little room that had once been the parlour of the house. Mouldy paper was hanging from the walls. Much of the plaster had fallen from the ceiling and lay where it fell. One or two rickety chairs were the only attempt at furnishing and the accumulated dirt of years littered the floor.

No one was in sight, but the dog ran on into a back room and from there the intruder heard a low mumbling voice.

"Stay here, Peg," Archibald said authoritatively. "He's drunk."

But her instinct drove her quickly forward, in spite of his command.

"He's sick," she said.

Standing in the second doorway they looked into a room as dirty and neglected as the first, but they did not notice walls or ceiling or floor, for on a cot by the farther wall lay Ezra Watts, haggard, ghastly, purple-faced, unseeing, tossing restlessly on an unspeakably dirty bed and muttering meaningless things.

With a little cry of pity, Pegeen ran toward him, but Archibald caught her in his arms and lifting her bodily, carried her into the next room.

"Listen, Peg," he said quietly, as he put her down. "The man has fever. There's no telling what the disease is. I can't have you taking chances. You can help most by getting on Zip and riding down to Miss Moran's to telephone for Doctor Fullerton. Tell him what's wrong and that I want him at once. Then ask Miss Moran for some old linen she can spare and some soap and bring them to me."

"But you're going to stay," she protested.

"And who'll take care of me if I get sick unless you keep in shape for it?"

The argument was overwhelming. She allowed him to lift her to the saddle and pelted away down the road at a breakneck pace, while Archibald went back into the house.

He found an old stove in the kitchen and made a fire in it. Then he filled a kettle with fresh water and set it over the fire.

Whatever the doctor's verdict was, hot water was sure to be needed in that house.

Pegeen was back in a few minutes.

"Miss Moran and Mr Meredith have gone motoring," she said breathlessly, as Archibald lifted her from the horse, "but Ellen's coming. John's going to bring her over in the cart. I've got some sheets and towels and a blanket and a cake of soap, but she'll have more linen and scrubbing brushes and lots of cleaning things. There comes the doctor now. I hear his car."

A muddy, battered roadster came plunging up the crooked road at reckless speed and a tall, wiry, competent-looking man sprang out of it.

"Just caught me. I was rolling out of the yard when they yelled after me. Didn't even have to crank up. So the germs have downed Ezra at last! Nature does get back at a man in time. Lord, what a hole!"

He went briskly through the front room, growling anathemas at the foulness, and bent over the tossing, muttering man on the bed with as lively an interest as though the patient had not been the black sheep of the Valley.

A body was a body to Dr Fullerton, and his business was saving bodies. The harder the battle, the greater his interest and enjoyment. As to the value of the salvage to the community—that was the community's business.

"I'll patch up the tenements," he said to the gentle, nervous, little Protestant minister in Pisgah. "It's up to you and Father Rafferty to see that your people lead decent lives in them." But when the little man or the priest needed backing up with work or money, it was usually Dr Fullerton who lent the hand or the dollars.

He was all doctor as he examined Ezra Watts, keen-eyed, deft fingered, intent, but as he straightened himself and looked down at the dirty, unshaven face, the keenness gave way to kindliness in his eyes.

"Nothing contagious," he said shortly. "Pneumonia with some complications. Not much show for him except in his tough constitution. He never did drink, for all his cussedness; and that's in his favour now. Fed himself enough, such as it was and it was plain food with no knick-knacks. That counts for him too. It's the high-living, robust fellows that wink out with pneumonia. Shouldn't wonder if we'd pull him through, provided we can get him clean without killing him. Got to have a scrubber and a nurse here and quick about it."

"How about me?" Archibald asked. "Strong and willing at scrubbing and nursing but not a professional in either line."

"Call Peggy," ordered the doctor. "She's one of my best nurses; but you and I'll have to turn in and give him a bath before we hand him over to her."

Archibald found Pegeen fairly dancing with eagerness and impatience on the doorstep. "Oh, my stars, I'm so glad it isn't catching," she said, darting past him into the sick-room. "I couldn't have stood it not to be able to see him. There's such a splendid lot to do. It's awful when there isn't anything you can do but sit around and wait. This is the very best chance I ever had."

"Well, you keep the fire roaring in the kitchen," ordered the doctor, "and warm some of those towels and the blanket for us and see that there's plenty of hot water. Mr Archibald and I are going to give Ezra's system the worst shock it has had since childhood. After that's over, you can help us clean the front room a bit and move him in there."

She flew into the kitchen with the towels and blanket, quick, noiseless, radiant.

Dr Fullerton grinned as he watched her go.

"Funny what a passion for seeing to people that youngster has," he said, "and what a corker she is at it, too. She's helped me in some tight places,

child as she is. Once it was sewing a man up—bad mowing-machine accident. His wife couldn't stand by; but Peg could. White as a sheet, but never batted an eye until she'd done all I needed. Then she went away quietly into the yard and keeled over in a faint—but not till her job was done, mind you. That's Peg."

Ellen and John arrived during the progress of the bath, and, within an hour, the sick man lay between white, lavender-scented sheets in a room that, while forlorn, was amazingly clean.

"When he comes out of the fever, he'll think he's died and gone to hell," Dr Fullerton prophesied. "A clean eternity would be about the worst future Ezra could figure out. Who's going to look after him, while I see to some of my other patients?"

"Me," announced Peg, making up in enthusiasm what she lacked in grammar. "Boots is at Mrs Neal's and it won't hurt Wiggles and Spunky and Peterkin to go without supper once, and Ellen'll give you some supper, Mr Archibald. Won't you, Ellen?"

"Miss Nora would want me to be staying here," protested Ellen.

Archibald settled the question.

"Peg and I will stay," he said, "and maybe Ellen will send John over with a bite for us. We'll have provisions in here by to-morrow and the back room fit to be lived in. He couldn't be moved, I suppose, Doctor?"

Dr Fullerton shook his head.

"Finish him," he said. "I'll have Miss Kirby down from Albany to-morrow morning. She's the only nurse I know who likes cases of this sort—eats 'em up. Can't be too bad for her. Only thing she balks at is a sick millionaire. Abnormal woman, but a rattling good nurse."

"Couldn't I—" began Pegeen. She looked woefully disappointed.

"You couldn't." The doctor was firm. "Not until after he's over the ridge one way or the other. Then there'll be enough for you and anybody that applies. Just shows what a frost virtue is. I've had highly respectable patients neglected and here's a spirited contest for the privilege of taking care of Ezra, who's as worthless a customer as you'd find in a day's journey."

"Oh, Doctor, he's so sick!" Pegeen was distressed, shocked.

"But he's not dead. It's only after they're dead that we can't speak ill of them. I'm not going to let Ezra die, so I feel perfectly free to tell the truth about him. There's the medicine. Nothing much to do at this stage of the game. I'll be back in an hour and bring a tank of oxygen down to have it handy. Don't you fret, Peggy. He's going to rob many a hen-roost yet."

He went away, driving in utter defiance of the speed laws. John and Ellen drove off home, and Peg and Archibald sat down in two of the rickety chairs near the bed upon which the transformed Ezra lay, breathing heavily.

"This, Miss Pegeen O'Neill, is what comes of neighbouring," said Archibald.

"Yes; isn't it splendid?" Peg was important, shiny-eyed.

"Well, come to think of it, I don't know but what it is," admitted the man.

"Doesn't he look different when he's clean?"—Pegeen lowered her voice to sick-room pitch, but she was too excited to keep still and Ezra would not hear.

"Even so he's not beautiful." Archibald studied the face on the pillow as he spoke. A weak, evil face it was even now when the man's spirit did not look out through his eyes, but Peg's tender heart could not find helplessness quite unbeautiful.

"I sort of think he was a good-looking little boy," she said. "His nose is straight and nice and his mouth could have been real sweet if he hadn't spoiled it. I shouldn't wonder a bit if his mother'd been awfully proud of him when she got him all fixed up to go somewhere."

Her face was wistful, sweet with pity for the little boy of the long ago, whom life had wrecked, and the picture her words had called up made Archibald look at the sick man with kinder eyes.

"Oh, Peg! Peg!" he murmured softly, "what a friend to sinners and weaklings you are!"

"They've got to have friends," said Pegeen.

The doctor came back after a while. The Smiling Lady and Richard Meredith came too, and Mrs Benderby, after her day of ironing and her three-mile walk home, toiled up the Back Road to see if there was anything she could do to help. Mr Neal rode over and offered to spend the night, but, in the end, Archibald and the doctor stayed. Pegeen, protesting stoutly, was carried off home by Miss Moran.

"Nothing you could do to-night, Peggy," said the doctor. "Save your ammunition."

Life and Death stood beside the bed in the little house on the Back Road that night; but it was Death who turned and went away in the grey of the morning.

"He'll do now," said the doctor, "but it was touch and go for a while. The oxygen held him. Sometimes I wonder——"

His strong jaw set once more in fighting grimness—"But it isn't up to me to wonder. Beating Death, in a catch-as-catch-can, is my end of the job, and I rather think I've downed him this time. What life will do with the man is another story."

"I'd like to help tell the story"—Archibald had never stood by in such a fight as the doctor had fought that night and the experience had left him with

a humble consciousness of his own uselessness, a strong desire to play a manlier part.

Dr Fullerton looked at him sharply from under heavy eyebrows that gave his face a misleading fierceness.

"Don't sentimentalise, man," he said bluntly. "It takes people that way sometimes—running up against Death and barely slamming the door in his face—but don't imagine the close shave will change Ezra any more than his bath will. He'll be as mean and as dirty as ever in a few weeks. We've done our damnedest for him to-night, but we're the ones benefited by it. Life's a doubtful blessing to Ezra. Help him if you want to, but do it with your eyes open and because you want to, not because you expect to reform him. He isn't the reforming kind."

Archibald thought his words over after he had gone. Probably they were true—but on their heels came other words. "I believe there's a decent scrap of Soul hidden away somewhere in Ezra, hidden so deep that he himself doesn't suspect it's there," Nora Moran had said.

"I shouldn't wonder a bit if his mother had been awfully proud of him." It was Pegeen who had said that.

Who could tell? One needn't sentimentalise, but one might as well give a man the benefit of the doubt. That was neighbouring.

The nurse from Albany came and ate up the case, according to prophecy, but in a few days she went away to meet direr needs, and then Pegeen's turn came. She was in her element, and Ezra, a limp edition of his former self, showed a flattering satisfaction in the change from Miss Kirby's ministrations to Peggy's. Surliness was as natural to him as breathing and he was no angel patient; but it was quite useless to be surly with Peg. She ignored it, and went her cheerful, tolerant way, coddling,

coaxing, encouraging, tyrannising, amusing, unmoved by stubbornness or rudeness or anger or ingratitude, obeying the doctor's orders and, where the orders ended, "seeing to" Ezra according to her own ideas of the way the thing should be done.

Archibald, and Miss Moran, and Mrs Benderby, stayed with her in turn, but the case was hers, and Dr Fullerton always addressed her as "Nurse O'Neill," to her profound satisfaction.

Archibald missed her miserably at the shack. Mrs Benderby was looking after him. She had called the doctor in as he drove by one evening during the first week of Ezra's illness; and after an examination he had told her kindly but frankly that her days for hard work were over.

"You may live for many years," he said; "live comfortably, too, but no more washing and ironing and scrubbing, Mrs Benderby. We'll have to find something easier for you to do."

He spoke as though finding it would be the simplest matter imaginable and indeed it proved so; for Archibald, temporarily bereft of Peggy and robbed of self reliance through many weeks of being "seen to" by that young person, was desperately in need of feminine ministrations.

"Just the thing for you," the doctor said heartily, as he told Mrs Benderby of Archibald's forlorn plight. "When Peg gets through with Ezra we'll have something else for you." So there were good meals and cleanliness at the shack, but oh, the loneliness of the place! Mrs Benderby was devoted, she was kind, but she had her limitations. Pegeen, so it seemed to Archibald as he sighed for her, had none. He was lonely without her, infernally lonely, and he told her so. She was distressed about it, but Ezra needed her most and that settled the matter so far as she was concerned.

"I'm homesick. I'm most crazy to go home,"

she confessed, "but I wouldn't for anything. Sometimes I think he most likes me; but he's dreadfully ashamed of it. He's dreadfully ashamed of any nice feeling he has. Isn't that funny? After he says anything pleasant, he swears right off quick for fear you'll think he meant it. I do wish I could get him used to being nice so it wouldn't hurt him the way it does."

Even Pegeen could not quite achieve that—Ezra progressed to the point of being nice occasionally but it always hurt him, and only to Peggy did he even make the concession of being very intermittently "nice."

For Archibald and the doctor and all the rest he wore as lowering a face and as ungracious a manner as though they had been cruelly abusing him instead of saving his life and paying his expenses. Archibald found the thing rather discouraging, but Dr Fullerton laughed over it unconcernedly.

"Great Scott, man," he said, when they talked of it one day after a visit to the rapidly convalescing invalid, "I don't pull my patients through because I expect gratitude. I do it because it's playing the game. That's the only satisfaction that amounts to anything. Pick out a white man's game and play it for all there is in you. Then life's worth living.

X

THE day came when Ezra was well enough to shift for himself and he gave everyone—including Pegeen—to understand that he was glad to be rid of intruders.

"It'll seem mighty good to get back to living as I please," he said, as Peg, calmly autocratic to the last, gave him a dose of medicine before joining the doctor who was waiting to drive her home.

"I'll bet it doesn't." She was amiable but positive. "You'll hate it and I'm sorry you've got to do it, but I think maybe you'll take better care of yourself than you did. Don't forget your medicine after meals. If you get into any trouble I'll come over and see to you."

Ezra grunted derision, but she held out her hand and smiled up at him so whole-heartedly that he was surprised into an answering smile.

"You're a queer one," he said, "but you're better than most." It was grudging, inadequate, but coming from Ezra it was glowing tribute, and Peggy went out to the car in high spirits.

"I'm going to miss Ezra," she said as the doctor tucked her in. "Of course he isn't like Mr Archibald, but I've got real fond of him."

"Holy Smoke!" commented Dr Fullerton.

"I have," she insisted, "and I'm sure now that he likes me. He said I was better than most. That's a lot for Ezra to say."

"It's impassioned eulogy," said the doctor—"but, Peg, speaking in cold blood, as doctor to nurse and without any of Ezra's overflowing sentiment, I'll

admit that you *are* better than most. You really ought to be trained for a nurse, Peg."

The small girl's face flushed with happiness at the praise.

"It'd be lovely," she said, "but I can't because I'm going to be married and I guess my own children will keep me pretty busy. I do hope they'll have measles and whooping cough and all those things early. It's so much better, isn't it? And it'll take a lot of time for eight of them to have everything."

"That's a fact. It will," agreed the doctor. "You're counting on eight?"

She nodded.

"Yes; I guess that's enough unless you have perfect stacks of money. I want them all to go to school. School's so lovely. I'd have liked awfully to go more, but there was always somebody to see to."

Dr Fullerton gave her arm an affectionate little squeeze.

"You know more than any of the rest of us as it is, Peg. Schooling you would have been 'gilding refined gold and painting the lily.' I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll undertake to see all eight of those children through whooping cough and measles and any blamed thing they choose to have and I won't charge you a cent for it."

Pegeen looked immeasurably relieved.

"That'll be perfectly splendid," she said happily. "Doctor's bills do make lots of trouble."

"They trouble the doctors."

Dr Fullerton grinned ruefully as he admitted it. A very large percentage of his patients showed absolutely no interest in his bills when he sent them.

Archibald and Wiggles were waiting for Pegeen at the meadow bars and each welcomed her after his own fashion. Wiggles was the more exuberant of the two. Only by sheer force was he kept from meeting a sudden and violent death in his wild effort

to climb into the car before it stopped; and when the small girl finally stood by the roadside, he gave an exhibition of hysterical affection ill befitting one of his stern sex. Archibald merely took his pipe from his mouth and came forward to lift Peg from the car, with a quiet, "Well, here you are, Nurse O'Neill," but the satisfaction in his face was good to see, and Dr Fullerton chuckled over it as he went spinning on down the Valley.

"That youngster has lit on her feet," he told himself contentedly. "Hanging over those bars watching for her for an hour, I'll bet. Wonder how much money the man has anyway."

Meanwhile the three he had left behind on the roadside were going happily up the meadow slope to the shack. Archibald and Peg went hand in hand and, as usual, she accommodated her pace to his long easy stride by a system of two steps and a skip, while Wiggles gyrated excitedly about the two, yelping his joy.

"Glad to come home, child?" the man asked.

She squeezed his hand lovingly.

"I'm so glad I'd like to do what Wiggles is doing," she said. "I feel as if I'd been away two months instead of two weeks."

"Make it two years," he amended. "That's the length of time I've spent missing you. What did I do before you happened to me, Peg?"

"You needed seeing to. Gracious! You've been doing something to the house!"

He looked just a trifle embarrassed, doubtful.

"See here, Peg," he said bluntly. "I never did like your trotting back and forth night and morning and looking after Mrs Benderby at all sorts of unearthly hours."

"That doesn't hurt me," she protested.

"Well, it hurt me, and things are different now. I didn't tell you about Mrs Benderby because I

thought it might worry you, but Dr Fullerton says she has to stop going out by the day—not seriously ill, you know, but she'll have to let up on very hard work."

"Oh, dear, isn't that dreadful." Pegeen's eyes were flooded with anxiety. "Isn't it lucky I've got some money? The rent's seven dollars and then meals—but I'll have plenty this summer and then maybe she'll be better, and——"

"Bless your dear heart," Archibald interrupted. "You aren't going to spend your money on her. I'll look out for her—glad to—only it seemed to me—she's got used to being up here now and seems to like it and she could relieve you of the cooking—and I don't know how you feel about it, but I thought I'd like to have both of you stay here with me. I had the carpenter knock up a couple of rooms at the side of the shack."

She stopped in the path and stared at him, shining-eyed, wondering.

"Oh, my stars!" she said in a hushed little voice. "My stars!"

"Don't you like the idea?" he asked anxiously.

"Like it!" The wonder in her face broke up into little ripples of delight. "Like it! Why it's perfectly splendid! It's the loveliest thing I ever heard of! I could sit down and cry the way I did when the larkspur happened—but think of you wanting us—Mrs Benderby too! And everybody thought you didn't like folks at all!"

"I thought so myself," admitted Archibald; "but you see I hadn't ever really known anyone."

"Well, I've got to run. I've simply got to. Walking's no good when you feel the way I do, and I can't wait to see the new rooms."

She scampered off up the path, with Wiggles barking joyously before her, and when Archibald reached the shack at a more leisurely gait she had

inspected the new rooms and was sitting in the living-room, Wiggles at her feet, Boots in her lap, and Spunky on her shoulder, while Mrs Benderby stood with her hands on her hips looking down adoringly at the Small Person in the chair.

"I'm home! I'm home! I'm home!" Pegeen was singing to the laughing baby.

"We're all home now," Archibald said, as he stood in the doorway and looked at her. "You *are* the home, Peggy child."

Supper that night was a party. The Smiling Lady had sent John over with a big bunch of glorious blue larkspur. "Peg's 'glad' flower is the flower for you all, to-night," said the word that came with it.

And Mrs Benderby had made a cake with pink icing and an amazing design in little red candies around the edge of it, and there was ice cream, a contribution from Mrs Neal.

"It's like a birthday—only I never had this kind of a birthday," said Pegeen, as she beamed across the blue flowers that, for all their gladness, were not so glad as her face, while Mrs Benderby, torn between her ideal of the solemnity appropriate in waiting on a city gentleman and her sympathetic joy, hovered round the table with relays of hot biscuit and fried chicken, and Wiggles, having been surreptitiously presented with a chicken leg by Peg—a thing entirely against her own rules—sat on his haunches and begged for more.

Boots was asleep in the hammock and Spunky, true to feline type, assumed a profound indifference and sat on the hearth with her front paws folded cosily under her and a bored look on her little grey face.

"You are going to have this kind of birthdays from now on—only more so," Archibald announced. "This is just an unbirthday party. Wait till you see your birthday party. When *is* your birthday, Peg?"

"September—the fifteenth. I'm glad I wasn't born in winter. Spring would have been nicest. I'd have liked being born along with everything else."

Archibald dissented.

"Wouldn't have done at all," he said firmly. "You were special—extra special. Autumn needed you to keep it from being sad."

Mrs Benderby wouldn't allow Pegeen to help with the dishes.

"Other nights, maybe, if you want to, but not to-night," she insisted. So, as the afterglow faded and the stars came out to look at a blithe new moon Archibald and Peg sat once more on their familiar doorstep. For a time they were both silent, listening to the night noises, watching the play of moonlight and starlight across the meadow and the clutching shadows on the wood's edge.

"I wonder if Ezra took his medicine after supper," Pegeen said suddenly. "I'd most forgotten about him. Being terribly happy's sort of selfish, isn't it?"

"Not when you are making other people happy by being happy, and you are doing that."

She pressed her cheek against his shoulder for an instant.

"Well, being so happy was what made me remember Ezra. I suppose he doesn't know what it feels like. You see, he can't; because he doesn't love anybody. You can't have the real, soaked-in, choky kind of being happy unless you love somebody a whole lot and feel sure the somebody loves you. I tried awfully hard to love Ezra. I did honestly, and I did get real fond of him, but you can't exactly love anybody that won't be lovable. You can feel sorry and kind and everything like that, but loving's different. I guess God's the only one that can go right ahead and love everybody no matter what they're like. It doesn't make any difference about sinners. I could love sinners just as quick as scat, if they

were nice sinners that would love back; but I'm afraid God will have to do the loving with Ezra. I can't get any further than liking him even if he does swear and act ugly. I do hope he'll take his medicine and change the sheets."

"Well, he won't," said Archibald encouragingly. "Ezra's now engaged in going back to the blanket literally and figuratively, but don't fret about him, Peg. We'll do all we can for him, but you're back on your old job now and you'll have to give your whole time and attention to seeing to me."

"And Mrs Benderby and Boots and Wiggles and Spunky," added Pegeen. "Isn't it a lovely family! And just think of my having you all right here together—not having to go away to see Mrs Benderby or take Boots home nights or anything. I used to hate leaving you and sometimes I'd wake up in the night and worry for fear you'd get sick here all alone with nobody to see to you, and I'd always hurry as fast as I could, coming up in the morning for fear something had happened."

"Bless you!" Archibald rumpled the thick black hair with an affectionate hand. "I hated being left alone myself, not because I was afraid of anything happening but because the place was forlorn without you. Peggy, Peggy! How you do creep into hearts and settle down to housekeeping in them!"

XI

MRS BENDERBY proved herself a most satisfactory addition to the family. Just at first there was a ripple on the surface because Pegeen jealously resented any infringement of her rights in the matter of seeing to Archibald, but the two had that out promptly and satisfactorily.

"It's this way, Peg," the man explained seriously. "Mrs Benderby needs something to do. She'll feel dependent and unhappy if she isn't allowed to make herself useful, and the only way she can make herself useful is by cooking and washing dishes. It's different with you. Cooking and dish washing were the least of the things you did for me. You did them mighty well: I can't deny that. But you've fed my heart and washed the cobwebs out of my eyes, and you can afford to turn the cooking and dish washing over to somebody else. I want you free to go with me anywhere at any time. Your job is seeing to my heart and soul, Peggy O'Neill. As long as you can do that why should you give a hoot who sees to my meals and dishes?"

"I'm a pig! I'm a horrid little pig," Peg always repented as enthusiastically as she did everything else. "I'll go and tell Mrs Benderby so right now. I was perfectly snippy to her about coddling your eggs this morning, but she can coddle away just as she wants to, as long as she gets them right. You've got to have them *right* though, and, please, I'd so much rather plan what you're going to have for meals. I can do it better. Honestly I can."

"I haven't a doubt of it," said Archibald. "Plan

away—only don't grudge Mrs Benderby the cook stove and the dish pan."

All went smoothly after that. There was more time for the neighbouring expeditions, for long walks and drives, for picnics, in which Jimmy Dawes was usually included. He was Pegeen's humble slave, although he would have suffered tortures rather than admit it. He haunted the shack; but, ostensibly, his devotion was for Archibald and the offerings he laid at that amused young man's feet were many. He brought Archibald pailfuls of red raspberries. Pegeen adored red raspberries. He presented Archibald with bunches of pink roses from Grandmother Dawes's garden. Pegeen was daft about pink roses. He caught fish for Archibald's breakfast. Fish was the thing Pegeen liked best for breakfast. But to Peg, herself, the boy was painstakingly off-hand and brusque, giving her plainly to understand that she was only a girl and must be kept in her place. She submitted meekly and wound him around her finger, after the immemorial fashion of girls, even of very small girls.

She wound Archibald around the same slim finger. He was what Peg would have called "lonesomey" round the heart, during these long summer days, and Pegeen was good for lonely hearts. A world in which she loved and petted and companioned and made merry couldn't be such a very forlorn place; and making her happy was a consoling and satisfactory occupation.

The child's thin little face had filled out. The old anxious look had gone from her eyes. The promise of beauty was fast finding fulfilment.

"Have you noticed how lovely Peggy is, nowadays?" Nora Moran asked Archibald one afternoon, when he and she met in the Village store, while Peg waited outside on Zip.

"She was always lovely."

The Smiling Lady laughed at his quick protest.

"Always," she agreed, "but she's getting lovelier by the minute. One of these days she will be wonderfully beautiful. There's an exquisite delicacy about her."

"But she's perfectly strong and well."

Archibald's voice held a note of alarm.

"Absolutely. I didn't mean that she looked frail—but she'll never be the buxom, dashing kind. Her beauty won't jump at you. It will haunt you. I think that Irish type is the loveliest in the world—the black hair and the deep blue eyes and the clear skin and the flush that comes and goes—and when you add the sweetness of Peg's mouth and the love in her eyes and the freckles on her impertinent little nose—I rather think those freckles are fading, though. They'll soon be gone."

"I'd miss them," Archibald said regretfully. "And I hope she won't be a raving, tearing beauty. She'd break her heart because she couldn't see to all the sighing swains. I'm afraid she *is* headed that way, though. I've noticed it myself—and she's better than good to look at. She has a way with her.

He talked lightly; but he didn't believe that the black-haired, blue-eyed type was the loveliest the world had to show. There was a certain reddish gold hair that was neither brown nor auburn; and there were eyes that were sometimes the colour of sea water over sand and sometimes violet and sometimes darkly grey—— Still, Pegeen *was* blooming like a wild rose. There was no doubt about that.

Jimmy noticed it, too. He commented upon it one day when Pegeen and he had left Archibald smoking lazily, after a picnic lunch, and had gone off in search of berries for dessert.

"You're better looking than you used to be, Peg," he said, staring critically at her across a blueberry bush from which they were stripping the fruit.

"Uh-huh," agreed Pegeen. Her mouth being full of berries, she was temporarily incapable of more eloquent assent.

Jimmy felt that he ought to snub her, for her soul's good; but really—in that pink sunbonnet—— Oh, well, girls were funny.

"What are you going to do when Mr Archibald goes off and gets married?" he asked abruptly.

Pegeen choked over her mouthful of berries and looked at him, in wide-eyed dismay.

"Jimmy Dawes, it isn't so!" she cried.

"Silly!" Jimmy's tone was kindly contemptuous. Girls always went off half-cocked. "I didn't say he was going right off now and get married. I just asked you what you'd do when he did."

"Maybe he won't." She tried to feel hopeful; but Jimmy wouldn't allow it.

"Maybe nothing! Of course he will."

Peggy sat back on her heels and put her pail down. She had lost all interest in berrying.

"Oh, Jimmy," she sighed. "Whatever'd you make me think about that for? Everything's so nice just as it is."

"Yes; but you'll be getting married yourself some day. Then what'd he do?"

She thought it over.

"Well, if he'd wait till I grow up he could marry me and then I could go right on seeing to him."

"Catch him waiting!" Jimmy's emphasis was scornful. It implied disrespect for Pegeen's charms; but she was not offended.

"No; I suppose not," she agreed. "It'd be an awfully long time and he'd be as old as anything. Well, anyway, he isn't keeping company with anybody now; and when he does go off and get married, I'll just have to do the best I can. Let's go back. My pail's full."

As they stood up, side by side, the boy looked

down at the girl and a sudden red warmed the brown of his face.

"I'll tell you what, Peg," he said. "You grow up and marry me."

"I'd love to."

The cheerful promptness of the consent was most flattering; but, even at fifteen, the wooer felt that something was lacking. For a moment he hesitated, looking down into the frank blue eyes. Then he laughed and took Peg's pail of berries.

"Well, don't you forget it. That's all," he said with masterful gruffness, as he turned away to find the trail. He had never carried her pail before. Somewhere back in Pegeen's brain a disconcerting idea took form. Jimmy was growing up. He'd be going away to school next, and Mr Archibald would get married and have a wife to see to him.

She followed Jimmy's sturdy figure down the hill with lagging steps and her face was very sober when they joined Archibald under the trees.

"Tired?" he asked.

She smiled at him; but the attempt wasn't altogether successful.

"No, I'm not tired," she said; "but, someway or other, I feel lonesome."

He pulled her down on the grass and she curled up comfortably beside him; but the subdued mood lasted.

"What's the matter, Peg?" Archibald asked, as they stood in the doorway of the shack, late that afternoon. He was in his riding clothes and off to Pisgah to have Zip shod; but he stopped to put a finger under Pegeen's chin and turn her face up to his.

"Something's wrong, dear. Tell me about it."

Her long black lashes dropped over her woeful eyes, the wild rose flush came into her cheeks, her lips quivered.

"Why, Peg!"

She hid her face against the front of his riding coat.

"It isn't anything," she said with a little sob in her voice. "Honestly, it isn't anything—only I'll be so—l-lonesome, when somebody else sees to you."

For a moment he had a helpless sense of being a bungling man. Then he sat down on the doorstep and pulled her down beside him.

"Now see here, Peg," he said with simple seriousness. "You are too sensible to spoil our happiness by worrying over things that may never happen or over things that aren't going to happen for a long time. One of these days you'll be going away to school. I'm going to attend to that, and then you'll be growing up and travelling in Europe and going out in society and I'll need somebody to see to me in the off times when you're too busy. And then you'll be falling in love with some fine chap and getting married and you'd feel mighty bad if you had to go off knowing that there wasn't anybody to see to me properly after you were gone. Now wouldn't you?"

"Y-y-es," faltered Peg. Her eyes were perceptibly more cheerful. The bits about school and Europe had appealed to her imagination.

"There you are," Archibald summed up triumphantly. "Of course I don't need anyone else to see to me now, and I'm not going to have anybody, and nobody could ever take your place; but when you do go away to school and to Europe and all that, you'd rather have me married to somebody than leave me all at loose ends, now wouldn't you?"

Pegeen performed one of her amazing about-face movements.

"You'd have to be married," she said firmly. "I wouldn't budge a step, unless you were."

Archibald laughed.

"Well, then, that's all right; but there's no use

bothering about it as long as you and I can be together; and there's small chance of my marrying at all, Pegeen."

The laughter had died out of him and he stood looking down the Valley with eyes that did not see the meadows or the distant hills.

"You see, it's this way, Peg. I can't have the girl I want and there's no other."

There was pain in his voice and Pegeen slipped a small hand into his. Not a word did she say; but the grip of the little brown hand and the sympathy in the great eyes were comforting things. He shook off the blue devils and smiled down at her.

"So that's how it is, Pegeen—and now I'm going to the blacksmith's."

Down in Pisgah, he found public opinion, as represented by the men loafing about the smithy, in a ferment. There had been another barn burning during the previous night and, though the value of the property destroyed had been small, the fire seemed to have been the proverbial last straw. Some of the bolder and younger spirits of the community were outspoken in their determination to defy the law and take the matter into their own hands.

"If there ain't proof, then guesswork'll have to do," one of them said to Archibald when he entered protest against the wild talk; and even the older and more conservative men in the crowd nodded assent. The camel's back was broken. Valley patience had given out. No name was mentioned; but there was no doubt as to the direction in which the guesswork would point; and Archibald rode home, puzzling over the degree of his responsibility for Ezra Watts. He was inclined to think with the rest of the community, that Ezra was the barn burner; yet, though the suspected man had been closely watched, nothing had been discovered to connect him with the fires, except that sometimes he had been seen

abroad on the nights when they occurred. More than that was needed for justification of rough handling, and if the law could not reach Ezra, the best thing that could happen for both him and the community would be for him to go away before any violent outbreak could occur. Probably he would be only too glad to go, if he were warned of the danger and given money to smooth his way.

XII

ARCHIBALD ate his late supper absent-mindedly and spent his evening, as usual, with Pegeen and Wiggles and his pipe. Mrs Benderby always dozed in the kitchen after her supper dishes were washed, and Spunky, like her big cousins of the jungle, always answered the call to good hunting when the night closed in; but Pegeen and Wiggles and the man they loved kept each other company in the living-room or on the doorstep and, whether they were merry or quiet, all three found content at the day's end in being together.

At their usual early bedtime, Pegeen rose and lighted the bedroom candles; but, instead of taking his candle, Archibald reached for his cap which hung beside the door. He had decided to see Ezra before he slept and send him away from the Valley, if any reasonable amount of persuasion or money would move him.

"I'm not sleepy, Peg," he said. "No; nothing wrong. Never felt better. I'm just wide awake. Go to bed and don't lie there listening for me. Wiggles and I are going to prowl."

The drowsing dog whacked his tail sleepily against the floor, at the sound of his name, yawned elaborately, opened his eyes, and saw the cap in his master's hand. Whereupon he forsook all idea of sleep and converted himself into a canine battering ram, until finally assured that he was invited to join in whatever the cap might mean.

The two went out into the warm, starlit night; and Pegeen stood looking after them until the shadowy figures melted into the dark.

"I suppose it's Her," she said to herself, with a sigh, "but he didn't seem so awfully blue. I'm glad he took Wiggles."

Wiggles was glad too, exuberantly glad. Night wandering was an unusual experience for him. In the early evening, he curled up close to his master or to the small girl who shared his allegiance and no temptation was strong enough to lure him beyond the sound of their voices or the touch of their hands. When they went off to bed, responsibility fell weightily upon him. A watch dog had no right to night roaming and Wiggles knew it. So, though sometimes his yellow body quivered with eagerness when distant night noises called him and his sharp nose sniffled excitedly at the scents that came to him on the night breeze, he kept faith with the sleepers in the shack and watched over them with unswerving fidelity as only a yellow mongrel dog knows.

But now he was out and away with a clear conscience and with his master for companion, and he made the most of the happy chance. Such frantic following of fresh smelly trails! Such wild yelping at stone walls where woodchucks lurked! Such mad pursuit of little furry folk, going about their night business! Such excited returns to his master and futile efforts to tell him all about the things that, being only a man, he could not see or smell or hear!

"Larks, eh, Wiggles?" Archibald said laughingly, as the dog dashed back to him with the news of most prodigious occurrences further along the road.

Wiggles leaped up at him joyously, then, lighting on all four feet, stiffened and listened to something behind them. A moment later, the man's duller ears caught the sound of galloping hoofs. He stepped out of the road, wondering idly that so many riders should be out; and, as a dozen men swept by him, he peered curiously through the gloom. The night veiled the men's faces and they passed too quickly

for recognition; but as they went a laugh and an oath from one of them gave him a clue. Lem Tollerton's voice! It had been loud enough and insistent enough at the smithy that afternoon to fix itself in Archibald's memory; and as he heard it again a suspicion leaped into his brain. What had brought Lem Tollerton and his crew down the Valley? Ezra? Conviction came on the heels of the suspicion. Ezra, of course. Just what the night riders meant to do with the man, he did not know. Lem had talked of tar and feathers; but men did not carry tar and feathers on horseback. Whipping, probably. Archibald remembered Mr Neal's story of the Jew peddler and winced at the thought. Perhaps Ezra deserved a thrashing; but there was a slender chance that he was the wrong man.

With a sudden tightening of the jaw that meant action, Archibald turned from the road and swung himself over the wall.

"Come on, Wiggles," he called. There was a little ring of excitement in his voice. "Maybe we can beat them to it by the short cut."

Wiggles was willing—delighted. He did not know just what the new game was and it interfered with his hunting; but, since his master wanted to run, run they would, and the meadow turf was softer than the road and altogether life had become gloriously eventful. He raced along beside the running man, with occasional side steps, when provocation proved too strong, and scurrying haste to catch up after each lapse. Together, the two came to the wall bordering the Back Road, climbed it and found themselves within sight of Ezra Watts's cottage, but, just as they dropped from the wall, the same riders who had passed them ten minutes before clattered by them again.

Archibald stood still for a moment or two to regain the breath he had lost in his dash across fields. When

he ran down the road, the horsemen had already stopped before the cottage and one of them was pounding on the door.

"Come out of that before we smoke you out." It was Lem Tollerton's voice again and the profanity with which he elaborated his command was more eloquent than decent. The riders were all yelling now, accusing, cursing, threatening. Drunk, every one of them—Archibald realised it with a sinking of the heart. Reasoning with drunken men was fruitless business and he was one man against twelve. Ezra did not count. Still he pelted on, with Wiggles at his heels. As he joined the group before the cottage, the door opened and Ezra appeared in the doorway. His face was livid with fear, and the picture he made in the light of the dark lantern which one of the riders carried was not one to rouse sympathy. If ever a criminal, face to face with retribution, looked the part, the cringing wretch in the doorway looked it.

"What d'ye want?" he snarled, his little ferret eyes searching this way and that for a chance of escape.

"You," Lem Tollerton answered tersely. He seized the shrinking figure, jerked it down the steps, and handed it over to two men with ropes in their hands. Then, stepping back among the mounted men, he took a heavy horsewhip from one of them.

Archibald waited no longer.

"See here, men, this sort of thing doesn't go in a civilised community," he said. "You'd better stop feeling and do some thinking."

The quiet voice was as cheerfully conversational as though the stage had not been set for melodrama; and the lean, nonchalant intruder to whom the night had suddenly given birth stood with his hands in his pockets and a half smile on his lips; but there was a look in his eyes that made the men nearest him

glance apprehensively at the pockets and back away. Some of them pulled their hats low over their eyes. One or two wheeled their horses around, as though for flight; but Lem Tollerton was made of sterner stuff.

"You'll get along better if you'll take your own advice and do some thinking yourself," he blustered. "We don't want to do you any harm, Mr Archibald, but this is our affair; and, if you don't want to get hurt, you'd better not mix up in it. We're out to give this d—d fire-bug a dressing down that he'll remember and see him across the state line, and we're going to do it."

"What has he done?" Archibald asked, still cool, though his fighting blood was warming.

"Done? You know well enough what he's done."

"Where's your proof?"

"Proof be damned! Get out of my way."

Tollerton raised his whip as though to enforce his command and Archibald's right hand came swiftly out of his pocket. There was no revolver in it; but as his clenched fist hit Lem Tollerton's chin, that hulking worthy dropped as though he had been shot and lay still in the path. Archibald stooped, caught the whip from his hand, and backed against the cottage wall, while Wiggles, a ridge of upstanding hair along his back, his lips curled back angrily from his sharp white teeth, a low ominous growl sounding in his throat, crouched at his master's feet. Archibald had forgotten Wiggles when he had figured that he would be one against twelve.

"Don't be fools, boys," the man against the wall pleaded. "I'll promise to get Ezra out of the State for good, to-night. Maybe he's guilty. Maybe he isn't—but twelve to one isn't a man's game, anyway you look at it. You'll be glad you called it off, when morning comes."

The men wavered uncertainly. Several of them

made a threatening move forward. Archibald clutched the whip in the middle, with its heavy butt ready for action.

"I'm a friend of yours, boys," he said grimly, "and I haven't much use for Ezra; but I believe in fair play. I can't lay you all out before you get me; but I'll do all the damage I can; and if you don't beat the life out of me, God's my witness, I'll drag every mother's son of you into court, and send him up, if it takes the rest of my life and my last penny to do it. You'd better think it over."

For a moment, the men stood irresolute. Then one of them dug his heels into his horse's flanks and galloped off down the road. The others followed promptly, only the two dismounted men lingering to look ruefully down at Lem Tollerton's prostrate figure. As they hesitated, he groaned, put a hand to his head, opened his eyes—and closed them again.

"There's a pump behind the house, Nick," Archibald said. One of the men disappeared and came back with a gourd full of water which he dashed in Tollerton's face. The treatment worked well. Lem sat up, looked around him, and staggered groggily to his feet.

"Well, what the—" he began; but his friends took him by the arms, led him to his horse and helped him to mount.

"Nothing doing, Lem," Nick Bullard said soothingly. "Mr Archibald's going to take Watts out of the State to-night. That's good enough. Let's fade away."

Limp, dazed, reeling in his saddle, but sober, Lem Tollerton looked at the man who still stood on the defensive, his back to the wall and his dog at his feet.

"That's some little knockout of yours," he said with a sheepish grin in which there was no malice. "Don't tell *me* you was trained for a painter."

He held out a hand as he spoke and Archibald, laughing, met the hand half-way.

"It's a useful thing to have a knockout in one's fist," he said genially. "Come over to the shack some evening and I'll teach it to you."

When the last of the riders had disappeared in the darkness, he turned to Ezra who cowered beside him, still shaking with fear.

"Well, Ezra, the whipping didn't come off."

In spite of himself there was contempt mixed with the kindness in his voice. "But you heard what I said about your leaving the State?"

"Uh," grunted Ezra. Neither relief nor gratitude could move him to civility.

"That goes; but I'm willing to give you what money you'll need for a month or two. Fifty dollars ought to see you through; and I'm ready to hand it over when I've put you on a train at Pittsfield; but if ever you show your face here again, the boys may do as they please with you."

He stopped in astonishment; for the mention of the money had evidently wakened no interest and Ezra appeared to be listening not to him but to some sound from within the house. As Archibald leaned forward to see him more closely, he moved hurriedly toward the door.

"Come in here," he said. "I want to show you something."

Archibald stepped into the house and waited while Ezra scratched a match on the wall and lighted a candle. The flickering tongue of flame left most of the room in darkness; but it threw its light upon a man who lay upon the bed—a man in even worse case than Ezra's when Archibald had first found his way into the squalid little house—a bleared, bloated, dirty, unkempt hulk of a man who lay with closed eyes and breathed in short strangling gasps.

"He's been like that ever since I found him last

night," Ezra said. "I was going for you anyway in the morning. Seemed as if something had orter be done and I didn't know what."

"Why didn't you call Dr Fullerton?" Archibald asked wonderingly.

"Well, you know how folks feel about the barn burnings and I didn't know how Doc'd see his duty; but I thought you——"

"Who is he?"

Ezra looked back at the doors and windows and moved nearer to Archibald.

"It's Mike O'Neill," he whispered.

The name meant nothing to Archibald and his face showed it.

"The kid's father," Ezra explained.

"Pegeen's father?" The man's tone was amazed, unbelieving, protesting; but Ezra nodded his head.

"Uh huh. He's been hanging around ever since spring. Crazy as a loon. Stayed in that old wood-chopper's hut on Bald Pate, daytimes, and went skulking around nights, stealing enough to live on and burning a barn now and then just for fun."

"You're sure?" Archibald's heart cried out against the hideous thing. Peg's father the barn burner, the petty thief, the miserable, sodden wreck that lay there on the dirty bed! It was unthinkable and yet Ezra's voice and manner carried conviction.

"Oh, yes. I'm sure," he was saying. "I've known ever since the Shaker fire. I'd suspicioned there was somebody around that nobody knew about; and one night I'd run into a man when I happened to be coming out of Miss Moran's chicken house; but I didn't see him rightly. I was sort of busy not being seen myself. Then, the night the Shaker barn burned, I caught him running away down the road just after the fire broke out. I knew him the minute

I clapped eyes on him. 'Twus bright moonlight, you know. He ducked into the woods; but I trailed him up Bald Pate and then I come home and figgered things out. 'Twus plain as the nose on yer face that he'd been doing the barn burning; and, first off, I thought I'd tell folks and sort of clear things up for myself. But then I got to thinking about the kid and how bad she'd feel and there wusn't anybody to be upset be-cus *I* was a fire-bug and I didn't give a damn what folks believed about me; so I just decided to keep things to myself. I went up and called turkey to O'Neill, though—told the crazy fool that I knew all about what he'd been doing and that I could have him hanged but that I wouldn't if he'd let up on the barn business. I didn't care how much he stole. He seemed to sense what I meant and blubbered around and said he wouldn't light any more fires, only they looked so pretty when they burned and St Michael had told him to come back here and burn all the barns, and Michael was his special saint so he didn't want to contrary him. I told him I'd fix it up with Michael and then he quieted down and I come away. Looked as if he wasn't too batty to keep a promise, until last night. Then Tibbits's barn went up; and, as I wus sneaking along through the woods so as nobody'd see me and think I'd been out doing the burning, I stumbled over this here bundle of rags. Just the way he is now, he wuz. I had a time getting him down here and then I didn't know what to do next; but I figgered I'd better go and git you in the morning."

It was a long speech for Ezra. Never, to his own knowledge, had he strung so many words together at one time; and he stumbled through the story with a hang-dog air as though mortally ashamed to shift his vicious reputation to other shoulders.

Archibald listened with knitted brows.

"Poor Peg!" he said softly, under his breath. "Poor little Peg!"

Ezra shifted uneasily from one foot to the other and back again.

"What's the good of her knowing?" he asked gruffly. Archibald looked at him in blank surprise.

"Why, she'll have to know."

"No, she won't," Ezra snapped it out in his most disagreeable manner. "He's going to die. If he don't, he's too crazy to be left running around free. If he dies, you and Doc can bury him on the quiet; and, if he lives, you can chuck him into the asylum. She couldn't do anything for him, if she knew. What's the use bothering her?"

"But you—" Archibald began in bewilderment.

"Oh, I'd be moving along some time, anyway. What'd I stay for? And what'd I care if they think they run me out? Kind of tickles me to have 'em think I burned their barns and stole 'em blind. No use whitewashing me. It wouldn't stick. I'll light out; and then you can tell the kid some sort of fairy story that'll let her down easy."

He cleared his throat, sniffed unpleasantly, and drew his sleeve across his nose.

"She's better than most," he said.

Archibald looked into the dirty, repulsive face and humbled himself before the thing he saw in it.

There *was* a scrap of decent soul hidden deep down in Ezra Watts, as the Smiling Lady had said, and Peg had brought it to the surface. Here was a man capable of love and sacrifice.

"You're a very good sort, Ezra," Archibald said slowly. "I'd like to shake hands with you."

He held out a friendly hand and Ezra clasped it in a furtive, embarrassed fashion, but with a look of satisfaction on his ugly face.

"You stood up to 'em fine." It was his first word of appreciation, and it came haltingly. "I went out

becus I didn't want 'em to come in here and find him; but things looked sort of bad for me until you come along."

"You stood up to them better than I did, man." Archibald's voice was husky. Souls were surprising things. "It took more courage to face another man's punishment than to fight another man's battle. Now I'll go for Dr Fullerton. When he comes, we'll decide what to do about Pegeen."

"O'Neill's dying," the doctor said, as he stood by Michael's bed, an hour later. "You must bring Peg. It will be better for her to know that he is dead than to be always imagining he's alone and in trouble. And, in fairness to Ezra, we ought to tell the whole truth!"

He stopped and stood thinking for a moment, then shook his head decisively.

"No; that's wrong. It's fairer to Ezra to let him do the generous thing for love of Peg. It'd be a pity to let his first fine sentiment be still-born. Yes; on the whole, I believe we'd better let him go with his bad reputation intact. God bless him for a thieving, big-hearted, low-down scallawag!"

And so it was arranged. The doctor drove to Pittsfield with Ezra and put him on the midnight train.

"Get off when you feel like it," he said, "and let Archibald or me hear from you if you're in a hole so tight that you can't squirm out of it. Hang it all, I'm actually glad I saved your life, Ezra."

Ezra made no reply. His hour of expansiveness had passed and he had sunk back into his sullen quiet; but there were fifty dollars in cash and a cheque for five hundred more in his pocket; and somewhere back in his mind was an idea of raising chickens instead of stealing them. He had always liked chickens and now that he was a capitalist, he could indulge his fancies.

When the doctor reached the cottage on the Back

Road once more, Archibald borrowed the car and went for Pegeen.

"You'll have to hurry," Doctor Fullerton said, after a moment's examination of the man on the bed who had been given some semblance of cleanliness and order, and Archibald hurried. A half hour later he was back again, with a white-faced, great-eyed child who ran past the doctor and dropped on her knees beside the bed.

"Daddy!" she cried; and the love and yearning in her voice made the two men behind her bite their lips and look angry as men will when their hearts are touched.

"Daddy!"

The pleading voice found its way, somehow, to the fog-bound brain and Michael O'Neill's soul turned back from its long journey to look through sane eyes into the tender child face, framed in wind-blown, black curls.

"Why, Pegeen," he whispered feebly. "My little Peggy, of the curls!—But 'twas your mother I made the name for, Mary of the Curls! You've a look of her."

The eyes that had been blue as Pegeen's own before the drink blurred them, closed and the lips that had, on some far-off day, wooed Mary of the Curls settled into strange stillness, and Archibald, kneeling beside Peg, put his arm around her, drew her close and let her cry; while, stealing in from the outer dark, a lonely and forgotten yellow pup snuggled up to the sobbing child and nuzzled a cold wet nose into her hand.

XIII

PEGEEN carried a sore heart for many a day after Michael O'Neill's funeral. "He wasn't a very good father," she said pitifully to Archibald, "and he wasn't very good to Mother, but 'twas the drink that did it; and I think the drink's just a sickness, don't you? Mother had a picture of him, a little picture that she wore in a locket. He was young in it; and he looked so brave and glad and lovery. I like to think of him that way—but I loved him, even after he was—sick. It's a poor time to stop loving folks when they're bad, isn't it? That's when they need it the very most, and Daddy loved back real hard when he was sober.

In comforting her, Archibald dulled the edge of his own heartache; and the two neighboured faithfully, even enthusiastically. Sometimes they drove. More often they rode; and, though Pegeen was not quite her old gay self, the visits were usually high-hearted adventures. Everything one did with Peg was more or less of an adventure. There was something about her that lent spice to the most prosaic of expeditions and Archibald found himself looking at the Valley through her eyes and loving it. He had laughed sceptically when the Smiling Lady had said that there were no uninteresting people, that there were only people one didn't get at; but he began to believe that she had been right. There were delightful folk in the Valley and there were queer folk; but, delightful or queer, none of them bored him; and, when he remembered how often and how intolerably he had been bored in the old days, he

was forced to believe that the difference was in him, not in the people around him. After all, types were much the same. He could cap every character in the Valley with a corresponding one in New York. Externals were different; but the inner men and women were the same. So the change must be in himself; but he doubted whether, thrown on his own resources, he could walk the new road even now.

"It's Pegeen," he said to himself. "She's a universal solvent. If I had neighboured without her, I'd never have known these people as I know them now. She coaxes the best of everyone out into the open where I can see it; and after that the worst of him can't fool me. Even the worst of him doesn't look bad to me when I see it through Peg's eyes. Funny, perhaps, or pitiful, or sad, but not bad. Yes; it's Pegeen. She's made me free of *her* Valley."

All of which was modest and, in a degree, true; but, as a matter of fact, the Valley, having first accepted him on Pegeen's recommendation, and looked him over with the tolerance she inspired, liked him for himself and showed him its friendly side.

"Thee has a pleasant way with thee, Son," Eldress Martha of the Shakers said to him when he had sat on one of the straight-backed, rush-bottomed chairs in her stiff, spotless sitting-room for an hour one summer afternoon, holding high converse with the little old lady whose spirit was so much bigger and stronger than her body.

"I could wish thee were with us and at peace."

"I've been thinking lately that perhaps I'm on the road to peace, Eldress Martha," he said gently.

She smiled. When she smiled, the great grey eyes that glowed so wonderfully in her thin white face melted into sweetness and the hint of fanaticism died out of her look.

"The roads are many, Son, but there are sign-

posts along all," she said. "It is easy to know whether one is travelling toward the right goal."

"There are brand new kittens," announced Pegeen skipping joyously into the quiet shaded room and bringing a gust of the sunshiny outdoor world with her, "and the jam is heavenly this year, Eldress Martha. I tried three kinds, and I saw Sister Jane take honey out of the hives—only I didn't see it as close as I wanted to."

She dropped down on the floor at the Eldress' feet and leaned her head against the grey-clad knee.

"I don't see why bees should want to sting me." Her voice held a note of injury. "But they do."

Eldress Martha laughed. Her laugh was even better than her smile, a thing surpassingly girlish; and the tenderness in her face, as she laid her hand lightly on the child's head and smoothed the shining black hair, gave Archibald a sudden twinge of heart-ache. It must be very lonely sometimes on the spiritual heights, and this dear woman had walked there so long. He wondered whether she ever looked back to some far-away time of youth and counted the cost of the peace she had now.

But Pegeen was contented to take Eldress Martha's human side without question. She had never been over-awed by Shaker asceticism. That was perhaps the reason why the sisters adored her. They were such simple, friendly folk in spite of their rules and visions.

"Brother Paul came to the garden," Pegeen rubbed her cheek softly against the caressing hand, as she spoke, "and he told me a spandy new poem—a lovely one. He'd met it coming down through the orchard and it isn't a speck religious—just summery and sweet and all about butterflies and birds and clouds."

"And thee doesn't call *that* 'religious'?" asked Eldress Martha.

Pegeen recognised the gentle reproof with a smile.

"Why of course it is, when you stop to think about it—praising God and all his works and psalmy things like that—but I meant it wasn't anything you'd sing in church."

"Brother Paul meets many poems that are not for church worship." The Eldress spoke quietly but a shadow of anxiety clouded the serenity of her face.

"Sometimes I wonder if the beauty of this world is not too much in his mind and heart," she added. "Thee sees, child, it is good to love the beautiful things God has made; but always one must look through them to the Eternal Beauty."

"Well, you don't always have to say it," Pegeen said comfortably. "I believe that being chuckfull of love for anything is worshipping God, even if you don't think about Him at all when you're doing it. I just adore St Francis. Miss Moran's Ellen told me about him. She likes St Anthony best because he finds things for her when she's lost them, but I think St Francis was a perfect old darling. He did love everything so hard.

"But he is a Popish Saint, child." There was rebuke in the Eldress' voice, but Pegeen looked up at her serenely.

"I'll bet the birds and beasts didn't care *what* church he belonged to," she said, and Eldress Martha laughed once more.

"Thee has small respect for creeds, Peggy," she said, "but thee has a great heart."

The sisters crowded doors and windows to wave good-bye as Pegeen and Archibald rode away down the street and the small girl turned to throw kisses to them until a bend of the road hid the East Family buildings from view. Then she settled back into her saddle to talk things over. They always talked a neighbouring visit over. That was one of the best parts of it.

"Aren't they the sweetest things?" she said beamingly. "I just wish I could give every single one of them a nice little baby of her own."

Archibald gasped.

"Wouldn't it rather shake up the community?" he asked gravely.

Pegeen considered the proposition. "Well, I suppose it would a little—not having marrying and giving in marriage in their religion you know—like Heaven—but shaking up wouldn't hurt them, and I think it's dreadful for so many perfectly darling women to miss having babies—and it's a shame for the babies too because somebody else that isn't half as nice will have to take them.

"I think it's the lonesomest thing to go on cooking and sweeping and dusting and making jam and nobody to do it for but each other and God. Just think of the fun all those old ladies could have if the top floor was plumb full of babies growing up into nice Shakers. I guess it'd have to be grandbabies, but then if they had grandbabies they'd have had babies some time, so that would be all right.

"I told Sister Jane how I felt about it—she's the pretty one with pink cheeks that tends the bees—and she said they couldn't very well have babies of their own, but that she could find it in her heart to wish they had a top floor of real cuddly orphan babies. She loves to cuddle things. That's one reason why we're such great friends; and, do you know, she's got *twelve* dresses all as good as can be. They all have to be grey but there aren't any two the same shade and she gets a little change that way. I do love Sister Jane. She and I have splendid times together and she sort of spills over to me, when she isn't feeling so awfully religious. When we went to see the kittens, after Brother Paul said his poem to us, she told me the Eldress didn't like his writing poetry that wasn't religious, and spending so much

time out in the fields and woods instead of working when he's the strongest, youngest man in the family. They were going to call him up about it; but Eldress Martha said 'no' she'd attend to the matter, and that settled it. I tell you when Eldress Martha says 'no' the Elders just pick up their coat tails and go away on their tippy toes. But Sister Jane says she thinks Eldress Martha's worried about Brother Paul herself. She's terribly fond of him and he isn't very frequent in prayer lately and he doesn't testify at all —but he certainly does write scrumptious poetry."

"What was that you said about his meeting a poem in the orchard?" Archibald asked.

"Oh, that's the way the Shakers always talk about their poetry. Lots of them write hymns. Eldress Martha writes lovely ones—and they always say they met them. They think the Lord gives them the poetry ready made, you know."

"Direct inspiration: I see—Poor Brother Paul with his world beauty!"

Archibald looked as if he too were worried about the young poet. Little by little he was learning that the Happy Valley teemed with drama. This neighbouring with Pegeen was interesting, extraordinarily interesting.

Day by day he grew more dependent upon this child's companionship. Whether he rode or tramped or loafed or gardened or neighboured, he wanted her near. Even when he painted, she usually sat beside him dreaming or busy with some quiet work but always ready with smiles and eager interest if he looked from his canvas to her face or spoke to her; and it was not possible to feel that the world was an altogether disappointing and lonely place when one had such a comrade. Wiggles, too, did his dog best in the line of companion plays and a yellow dog's best of worship is a thing to warm the cockles of even the heaviest heart. There was a curious likeness between the child's deep blue

Irish eyes and the pup's liquid brown eyes, during those long August days. Passionate devotion welling up from child heart and dog heart made the eyes kin.

The little garden in front of the shack was ablaze with August glory now and Pegeen's face, as she bent over the flowers or knelt beside the borders making war on weeds, was a pleasant thing to see; but a sadness came into it, whenever she looked at the clumps of perennials striving lustily in preparation for another year. Archibald had said that he would come back to watch them bloom; but he had said that before Richard Meredith's coming, and back in the darkest pigeonhole of Pegeen's mind was a suspicion that she and Wiggles and Spunky and Mrs Benderby and the horses and the neighbours and the garden all added together would never be able to make him happy with Nora Moran away. She would not admit to herself in the daytime that the suspicion was there; but sometimes when she happened to waken in the night she would take it out and cry over it a little, very quietly.

She and Archibald rode often to the Shaker village where Eldress Martha was in her element with work and responsibility, pouring upon her torrent-wise. Even on her busiest days she had time for Archibald. The friendship between the two, whose lives had run in grooves so different, was a real thing and the man went away from his hours with the tender-hearted, steel-willed old woman with an uplift of spirit. After all the needs of brave souls were much the same. Whether it was Eldress Martha with her religious faith and her life of the spirit or Dr Fullerton with his agnosticism and bluff materialism, the test of the soul was its sincerity and courage. The doctor had put it in a nutshell, the night he had fought for Ezra Watts's life and won. Playing the game was the thing. To choose a game in which one believes there was good and to play it for all

there was in it—that was the life worth living. If love and laughter walked with the player, so much the better. If not—still there was the game.

And the more Archibald went the Valley ways, the more he realised that, in one form or another, neighbouring was the great game. There in the valley—out beyond—wherever men and women worked and hoped and loved and suffered, there was call for players stout of heart, strong of will, great of soul, wise of brain. Once when a baby's hand had curled round his finger, he had said to himself that neighbouring was not the last word, that a man's own meant more; but, during those Summer days when Pegeen and he went up and down the Valley, knocking at the doors of hearts and lives, he came to realise dimly that a man's own reaches out beyond the doors of his home, and that if he follows it to the soul heights and the love limits, he will find himself, walking there with the brotherhood of Man.

Ginsy Shalloway, who, by virtue of "sewing around," had gained a shrewd knowledge of human nature and was prone to sharp criticism, voiced the general verdict when she admitted that "the artist man's friendliness rang true."

"Seems as if he honestly liked folks and was real set on their liking him," she said, when the matter came up for discussion at the ladies's aid society. "I don't know as I ever saw a city fellow with as few trimmings. He's pleased as can be when he gets an invite to dinner and he eats so hearty, you'd think he didn't get the right kind of victuals at home if you didn't know Peg. He was eating dinner up at Nelsons' the other day when that big storm came up so sudden; and, if he didn't pull off his coat and go out into the hayfield with Martin and help to hustle the hay in. Real good help he was too, Martin says—stronger than you'd think and quick as a cat. And then the boys got to wrestling

out in the barn; and if he didn't lay them all out on their backs, as easy as rolling off a log. They were some surprised and ashamed; but he said he'd taken lessons of a Japanee and that the Japs beat the world for wrestling and that, if the boys would like to learn, he'd teach them all the tricks he knew.

"So now he's got a sort of class down in an empty loft at Jim Neal's and a lot of the boys go there twice a week. Mis' Dawes says their Jim's plumb crazy about it."

Jimmy wasn't the only boy who was crazy about the class in the barn loft. One by one they came trooping in, shyly and awkwardly at first; but soon with glad confidence and unbounded enthusiasm. Lem Tollerton dropped in one evening to learn the knock-out that had laid him low, and, in his wake, the young men of the Valley found their way to the loft. Archibald added gloves and foils to his equipment; and within a few weeks, wrestling, boxing, fencing and jiu-jitsu were epidemic.

"It beats all," Martin Nelson, the father of four husky lads, confided to Mr Colby. "My boys are poking and pounding each other all over the place, the minute they ain't at work; but I don't know as I ever saw them so good-natured. Seems as if they thought being knocked endways was a treat and they're always and everlastingly talking about playing fair and not taking advantage and not losing temper and not poking here or punching there. I don't know but what teaching them to fight's going to take the fighting out of them. Anyway they ain't hanging around the stores every evening cooking up trouble. They do say Lem Tollerton and his crowd are cutting out booze, because it gets at them and spoils their fighting."

Now and again, one of the older men, drawn by curiosity, came to the class to look on. He seldom went away without having a bout with the gloves or

a wrestling lesson and he usually came again. The crowd soon outgrew its quarters and Archibald went to Dr Fullerton with a plan.

"The Valley needs a men's and boys' club," he said. "Where can we have it and how will we run it? You know this community better than I do."

"I'm not so popular with it, when it's healthy," the doctor said dryly. "You're working as hard to make yourself solid as if you were running for office. Pity not to stand for something, with the pull you've got." He dropped his banter and laid a friendly hand on the younger man's shoulder.

"It's a bully work, man. You're doing more to humanise the Valley than the doves of peace could if they came in flocks. Nothing like beating an idea of honest sport into a fellow's head for making a decent citizen of him. When he's grasped the idea that there are some things no fellow can do, he's got something to work on. I'm inclined to think that boxing will grip a boy's soul when Sunday school fails. Now about this club. How much money will it take?"

"Oh, I'll put up the money." Dr Fullerton shook his head.

"No, you won't. That would be a mistake. Buy or rent a place if you want to fix it up; but organise a regular club and put some of your toughest specimens in as officers. Responsibility's most as good for a fellow as boxing. Let the members pay the running expenses out of the dues. They'll think more of the club if they have to do some hustling to keep it going. There's that old house of Rankin's. It's been empty ever since the old man died. Nephew it was left to lives out in Seattle. It's a whaling big place, but you wouldn't need to use it all and I've a notion you could get it for a song."

Archibald told Pegeen about the club that night. She was all interest and encouragement; but there

was a hint of mental reservation in her approval, and the man noticed it.

"Well, Peg, out with it!" he commanded. "What's wrong with the scheme?"

She blushed at discovery and hesitated, then spoke her thought frankly, as she always did to him.

"There's isn't anything wrong with it. It's splendid of you to do it and folks will be perfectly crazy about it—only I was just thinking how it's most always the men and the boys that get things done for them. I s'pose it's because they won't be good all by themselves the way women and girls will; but I don't think that's exactly fair, do you? It's like giving prizes to the worst spellers."

Archibald looked at her with a puzzled frown between his eyes.

"Why, Peg," he began; then stopped and thought the proposition over. Suddenly, something that the Smiling Lady had once said to him came back to him and his face cleared.

"Pegeen, I'm a fool—just a plain, block-headed fool. This Valley doesn't need a men's and boys' club. It needs a neighbourhood house and you are going to give it one. There can be a men's club and a boys' club and a women's club and a girls' club, just for the fun of the thing; but there'll be a big get-together club that will take all the others in. How's that?"

Pegeen's face was his answer. It was one rapture from brow to chin.

"It'll be perfectly wonderful," she said happily.

Then a shadow drifted across the rapture and she sighed.

"Well?" questioned the man.

"Oh, nothing. I was just thinking."

"Thinking what?" he insisted.

She looked very uncomfortable, wriggled uneasily in her chair.

"It's Miss Moran," she said, at last. "She was always crazy to have a club, here in the Valley—a neighbourhood house she called it just like you did. She used to talk and talk and plan and plan; but she didn't have money enough. I was just thinking how lovely it would have been if——"

She was on the borderland of unspoken things and afraid to go further; but Archibald opened her way.

"See here, Peg," he said abruptly. "You mustn't make any mistake about my feeling for Miss Moran. I'm head over heels in love with her. You're too clever not to know that and I don't mind your knowing it; but, because I can't marry her is no reason why you and I shouldn't talk about her exactly as we always did. If she'd like this club, there's one more big reason for putting it across, and the more she helps with it, the better I'll be satisfied; only you are giving the club-house to the Valley. Just remember that. Now we'll go and talk the thing over with Miss Moran."

His frankness cleared the air for himself as well as for the child; and when they found the Smiling Lady on her verandah and told her about the plan, the vague chill that had seemed to envelop her melted quite away before their enthusiasm.

"Splendid!" she cried eagerly. "Splendid! How you *have* come on with your neighbouring, Mr Archibald! I prophesied you'd make something of him, Peggy."

There was a ring of pride in the jesting voice, a glow of pride in the smiling face. Richard Meredith, watching her from the hammock, noticed both. She was glad for the Valley, but there was more gladness beyond that; gladness and pride and—yes, there was tenderness too. It meant much to her that her people were to have their neighbourhood house; but it meant even more to her that this one man was to give it to them, that they had found their way to

his heart, and that he was finding his way to theirs. Meredith's face gave no sign of anything save civil interest; but he drew back a little further into the shadow of the vines that clambered over the verandah trellis, and watched the girl and the man who leaned toward each other in the white moonlight, talking eagerly and with an intimate understanding that was new to him but prehistoric to them.

They altogether forgot him, when they went into the lamp-lighted room to figure on changes in the club-house; but, as he sat there in the shadow, feeling oddly old and tired, a little figure slipped out through the French windows and tucked herself cosily into the hammock beside him.

"Which do you think would be nicer to have—a piano or a phonograph?" Pegeen asked confidentially, gathering him, as a matter of course, into intimacy of discussion and planning.

The man smiled in the dusk. She was so small and sweet and friendly and—though that he could not know—so sure he needed seeing to.

"I'll give you both, for your neighbourhood house, Pegeen," he said—but added quickly, "if Mr Archibald doesn't object."

"Why, he'd be *glad*," she insisted stoutly, though back in her own mind there was a doubt. "That's perfectly sweet of you. Oh, dear, it does seem as if God must have been working on that club for years and years. Everything's going so beautifully. Only Deacon Ransom'll have a fit about the billiard-table. He won't fit hard enough to keep him away though, and Miss Moran says he's just got to let Sally come. I wish she'd get a beau down there and run off with him. Honestly I do. I'd help—if he's nice. Do you know, I think a piano and a phonograph's an awful lot for you to give. I wouldn't want anything but the phonograph, but you see the mothers are so proud if their daughters can play some pieces,

and when there's an entertainment, they always want the girls to show off; so it seems as if we really did need a piano. I'm going to tell everybody that you thought it up all by yourself, and Miss Moran didn't have a thing to do with it. I shouldn't wonder if you'd think of lots of things like that after a while. It isn't a bit hard, after you once get started—not if anybody's nice inside, like you. I guess city folks have to get new glasses to see country folks right, and some of them don't ever bother to do it; but the awfully nice ones, like you and Miss Moran and Mr Archibald, do. And then, after they put on the new glasses, they see so many kind things to do that they work like the very old Scratch to catch up with themselves."

Meredith pulled the child's head down against his shoulder and rumpled the thick curls with a gentle hand.

"It's late for me to be changing glasses or ways, Peg," he said softly; and his voice matched the grey of his hair. "Do you think I could ever catch up with myself, if I didn't have Miss Moran to help me?"

Peggy reached up and gave the hand on her hair a loving little pat.

"Why, it'd be as easy as can be for you," she assured him. "If you ever begin neighbouring—in earnest, you know—I bet you'll be perfectly splendid at it. Of course it'd be lovely to have Miss Moran help—but she wouldn't need to. She started Mr Archibald, but look at him now! I get jealous of the neighbours sometimes just for a minute; and he's done most of it all by himself. Miss Moran hasn't helped him at all, since you came."

"I've an idea she has kept right on helping him—in a way," the man said slowly—"and then he's had you to see to him, Pegeen."

XIV

A TIDAL wave of excitement rolled through the Valley when the news of the Neighbourhood Club was noised about; and, when, on the evening of September fourth, the house was thrown open to the public, only the bedridden stayed away. The doors were open at seven o'clock; and at eight the house was full to the eaves.

"They're perfectly wild about it," Pegeen confided happily to Archibald as she passed him in the hall. "Every blessed soul's doing something—even Deacon Ransom. He was as snippy as could be, when he came; and he said the billiard-table was an invitation to sin, but now he's out in the bowling alley in his shirt sleeves, beating Mr Nelson all to pieces and as proud as Mr Neal's turkey gobbler because he can do it. And Sally Ransom is sitting out on the side steps with Joe Trevor. I sort of think he's courting. And Mrs Neal dancing with Dr Fullerton. You ought to see her. She's as light on her feet as if she didn't weigh more'n I do. And Mr Colby is playing checkers with Mr Frisbie. Mrs Frisbie thinks it's worldly for a minister. And Mr Meredith is teaching some of the boys billiards and Miss Moran is cutting cake. We're going to have refreshments pretty soon, because the children have to go home early and it's their club just as much as the old folks', isn't it? They ought to grow up into splendid neighbours, getting such a lovely start here. It's the very best time I ever had, Mr Archibald. It is really." She

flew on down the hall and Archibald found his way to the kitchen where the Smiling Lady with a corps of willing helpers was making ready to feed the crowd. She was tired but radiant, and she waved a sticky knife at him as he appeared in the doorway.

"It isn't a success. It's a furore," she called gaily. "Everybody wants to join."

He crossed the room and stood watching her as she worked. They had been much together in the weeks of preparation for this night, sharing plans and hopes and dreams, working, side by side, for the good of the neighbours they loved, for her own people whom he had made his own people too. It had been sweet, perilously sweet. There had been times when the words he must not say had trembled on his lips, times when he had felt a blessed surety that the closeness meant as much to her as to him; but he had held fast to his idea of honour. He liked Richard Meredith. The older man had won his friendship against all the heavy odds. There was something about him in which one believed, something behind the outward reserve that gripped and held. He so confidently expected decency that in his quiet there was a compelling force. One did not fail men like Meredith—nor women like the Smiling Lady; and so he had fought hard and kept faith with both of them.

But she was so dear—so unspeakably dear. His heart ached with its desire as he looked down at her; and, glancing up, as she sent one of her helpers away with a laden tray she surprised the desperate longing in his eyes. An answer leaped into her own face. Eyes, lips, cheeks, were flooded with it. For an instant, they stood so, alone in the crowd. Then as swiftly as it had come, the revelation faded from the girl's face. Only the flush lingered as she turned to her work again; but there was a curious little thrill in her voice when she tried to greet Jerry

and Rosy Johnston's demand for chocolate cake, with her usual light gaiety.

"And you with three pieces of cake apiece tucked away inside of you this minute!" she protested.

"No toklate," Jerry assured her solemnly.

"No toklate," echoed Rosy, with an accent of reproach in her solemnity. The Smiling Lady swept the two into her arms and kissed both sticky faces with surprising fervour. The twins endured it. They even hugged her warmly, though hastily; but they did not, for a moment, lose sight of the main issue.

"*Now* toklate!" they chorused hopefully, as they emerged from the embrace; and, laughing, pink-cheeked, shining-eyed, she cut them huge slices of chocolate cake and sent them on their way, smeared, gorged, but rejoicing.

"It's all wrong," she acknowledged shamefacedly. "They'll be sick, I suppose; but they did want it so dreadfully. I couldn't say 'no.'"

Then, realising the recklessness of admitting weakness in the face of great longing, she dropped the cake knife and fled to the pantry, leaving Archibald exultant but tempest-tossed. He was sure now, absolutely sure. She loved him, not Meredith. Her face had said it, beyond shadow of doubt, in the moment when her guard was down. His heart sang for gladness—and yet he had no right to be glad. It would have been better if the unhappiness could all have been his. That she loved him would make no difference in the outcome of things. She would put away the love and keep her word to the man she had promised to marry. He was sure of that and though the sacrifice of two lives for one might be all wrong, though it might not be for the ultimate happiness of even the one, he knew that he would only hurt her, not shake her resolve, if he should fight for his own. And then there was Meredith. Meredith and he were friends now.

The man who could not have *his* chocolate cake turned and went out through the kitchen door into the friendly, sheltering dark.

The house was ablaze with lights. Through the open windows came a stream of sound, laughter, chatter of voices, the click of billiard balls, the clatter of dishes, the music of the phonograph, the shuffle and tap of dancing feet. The Valley was neighbouring happily, whole-heartedly, as it never had neighboured before; but, out in the night, beyond reach of the far-flung light, the man who had brought the thing about leaned his arms upon the top rail of a fence, hid his face against them and fought hard against old enemies, against bitterness and discouragement and a loneliness of which he had almost lost the trick, in months of living among neighbours.

There was an autumnal chill in the air. The quiet stars looked down frostily from infinite heights. All the warm, companioning summer had slipped away.

Archibald straightened his shoulders and moved slowly toward the house. He had come to the end of summer's trail.

There were two figures on the side door steps and Archibald caught a few words in a man's voice. He veered away hastily, smiling a little, as he went toward the front door. Joe Trevor was unquestionably "courting"! To be alone with the one girl and to have the right to speak!—lucky Joe!—even though Deacon Ransom was in the offing.

It was long after midnight before festivities flagged and the older folk began to talk of homegoing; but Archibald and Nora Moran did not come within speaking distance again until the final ebbing surge of the crowd flung them together in the big assembly room on the main floor. Good-byes had begun and the two stood side by side, shaking the hands of crowding neighbours and smiling into the friendly

faces. Suddenly a boy's voice shouted "Three cheers for Mr Archibald!" The homegoers turned back and gave the cheers with a will.

"Speech! Speech!" Dr Fullerton called. The cry was taken up and echoed through the house.

Archibald's face reddened but there was a fine glow of happiness in it.

"I'm no talker, friends," he said. His voice shook a little as he spoke. "I'm afraid I couldn't even paint what I feel. It's the sort of thing there's no way of telling; but there's one thing I do want to say. The Valley has given me more than I ever can pay; and, if you like Neighbourhood House, I'm very happy; for I've had a hand in it. Miss Moran and Mr Meredith and Dr Fullerton and I have worked together to make the thing possible; but, though Miss Moran started me on the right track, it was Peggy O'Neill who taught me to neighbour. Neighbourhood House came out of Pegeen's heart. If you must thank somebody, thank her."

"Pegeen! Pegeen! Peggy! Peg!" The whole crowd was calling—men, boys, women, girls—calling for Pegeen. Out on the stairs, where, with Richard Meredith, she had been caught in the crush, the small girl clung to the baluster, sobbing with excitement.

"Come, Peg. They want you." Meredith lifted her in his arms, carried her down the steps and through the close pressing throng to where Archibald and the Smiling Lady stood, and set her on a chair beside them. Standing so, she could look over the crowd and be seen by all.

"Peg! Peg! Peg!" The greeting came with a roar.

Pegeen stood, smiling, trembling, her sensitive child face all a-quiver with feeling.

"Say something to them Peg," Archibald urged. She threw out her arms in a swift, inclusive gesture.

"Oh, I love you all so much!" she cried, in a choked little voice. "I love every single blessed one of you!"

There was no doubting it. Her face told it even more convincingly than her voice. She loved them all—and they knew it. No matter whom she happened to be seeing to, she was the Valley's Pegeen.

"Three cheers for Peg!" Jimmy Dawes whooped shrilly, and the crowd responded with deafening enthusiasm, while Pegeen clung to Archibald's shoulder and laughed and cried and loved everybody harder than ever.

"Do you know," she said to Mrs Benderby that night, after she had knelt beside her bed for a long time. "I might exactly as well get up. I'm so terribly happy I can't think of a single solitary thing to pray for."

Richard Meredith stayed at the house under the maples on the night of the club house-warming; and when he came down to breakfast the next morning, he looked peculiarly tired and worn.

"You didn't sleep well, Dick," his hostess said reproachfully, as they went out to the verandah after breakfast.

"Well, no; not as well as usual. Too much festivity. The thing went off with a tremendous bang, didn't it?"

She nodded laughing assent; but he noticed that she too showed signs of a wakeful night. Her eyes were tired and there were faint, purplish shadows beneath them.

"Wasn't Pegeen adorable?" she said. A wave of tenderness swept from Meredith's mouth to his eyes and tarried there.

"It's chronic with Pegeen." His voice, too, held tenderness. "I wonder what life will do with that big tender heart of hers".

"Hurt it."

It was seldom that the Smiling Lady was pessimistic. Meredith looked at her quickly and the tenderness in his face was not all for Pegeen.

"Yes," he agreed, "and she'll love her way straight through the hurt. I can't believe that even life can be unrelentingly hard to Pegeen. Life isn't often unrelentingly hard."

For a moment or two he stood silent, leaning against a verandah pillar and twirling a spray of belated honeysuckle bloom nervously in his fingers. When he spoke again, his voice was even quieter than usual, and there was nothing more disturbing than grave friendliness in his face.

"I've been thinking, dear," he said. "I'm afraid life's been a bit hard for *you*, lately. All the love in the world won't prevent mistakes; and I guess we've made mistakes—you and I—and your father."

The girl in the willow-chair looked up at him in swift question; but he went on without allowing her to speak.

"You see, your father was my friend. He believed in me and he couldn't die easily, leaving you all alone; so, because he knew I loved you better than all the world, he planned that I should stand between you and the world. He meant it for your happiness—and I was glad and proud—and you were willing—but we were blind, all three of us. We did not look along the road ahead."

The girl made a little gesture of protest. He dropped into a chair beside her, caught the slender brown hands, and held them.

"Look at me, dear," he begged. "Surely you're not afraid of me. You're afraid of hurting me. That's it—and you can't save me from the hurt. I was afraid of it right at first, after your father went away. You were very young and I knew that youth called to youth; but so many younger men came and went away. It was easy to see you didn't care for

any of them; and, in time, I began to believe that I could make you happy. I loved you as well as any man could and you loved me—in a way—and trusted me, and there was no one else. But even then I had sense enough not to hurry you. So I waited—and then the thing I had almost forgotten to fear happened."

The low, steady voice broke, and for a moment fell into silence. Then he went on:

"I felt, as soon as I came back here this summer, that things were different; and after a while I began to understand what the difference was; but I waited to make sure. Last night I knew. Tell me, Nora —we owe each other frankness—tell me—there *is* some one else now?"

She raised her eyes full of tears to meet his that were full of pain.

"Yes," she said, and there was a sob in the word. "I love you dearly; but—there is some one else."

He stooped his head and kissed the hands he held.

"Don't cry, child. You mustn't cry. You should have told me long ago, instead of waiting for my blundering brain to understand. It's all right. When I stood on the club-house stairs last night and looked at you and Archibald among your neighbours —you so proud of him and he so proud of you, and the neighbours so proud of both of you—I realised how absolutely right it was. It isn't easy to give you up—but it would be harder to have you and not make you happy—and I'm not going to drop out of your life. We've been friends too long for that. Don't worry over having hurt me. I'm not going to be miserable. I've rather a notion to try my hand at neighbouring. Peggy's flatteringly sure I'd do well at it, if I could get a good running start. Look happy, dear. I think you are going to *be* very happy —but there's one thing I want from Archibald and you. I want a share in Pegeen.

She smiled at him through her tears.

"Daddy always told me you were the finest gentleman in the world," she said, "and I think he was right."

He went away after that, leaving her to the happiness she was too tender-hearted to show him, and he said good-bye cheerfully, unemotionally; but he went down the road, with white lips and unseeing eyes, and, when he appeared at the door of the shack, Mrs Benderby, who was sitting there, rose in alarm at the sight of his face.

"Mr Archibald's away for a walk."

Meredith made no sign that he had heard.

"Pegeen," he said unsteadily. "I want Pegeen."

XV

ARCHIBALD'S walk had taken him Witch Hill way. Golden rod and wild asters were making merry along the roadside; and, in the wood's heart, gleams of crimson and gold were glinting through the green. Summer was gone; but magic lingered; and the old enchantment worked in the man's brain and heart. He had never followed that climbing road without the Smiling Lady at his side and his heart was sick for her, for the eyes with the sea waves in them, for the sun-kissed hair, and the smiling lips, and the singing voice, and all the warm gladness of her. He had known it would be like that; and yet he had come. There were days when wisdom did not wear the look of a virtue; and this afternoon, when Pegeen was busy with housework and even Wiggles had wandered away on important business of his own, the man who had been trying to be contented gave up trying and set out to keep tryst with memory, beside a hill top well, where on a summer day a witch had sat, smiling and weaving spells.

He was in no hurry. There were milestones to count along the way. Here she had leaned to look into the brook; there she had stopped to mock a bird's call. All the little green leaves whispered of her and the red and gold leaves flamed more warmly, remembering her. Archibald wondered whether he was sorry he had come—or glad. Glad, he thought; but it was a sorry gladness.

As he neared the top of the hill, he paused, half inclined to go back without facing the empty seat

under the old oak-tree; but running away was a habit he had put aside. With a queer smile that was not gay, he quickened his steps, pushed aside the branches that had grown across the path, and came out into the open. There was the well. There was the great tree. And there, on the mossy bank, in the shadow, sat the witch, smiling and weaving spells.

She sprang to her feet at sight of him. The smiles fled; but the spells worked on. The two looked into each other's eyes, questioning, avowing. Without telling, other than the glad surrender in her face, the man knew that the world was changed for them, that the walls were down. All wonder, and great desire, he opened his arms; and, there in the enchanted wood, where "anything might happen," they met "the Wonderful Thing."

Pegeen was alone in her garden, when Archibald and the Smiling Lady went to her. As she saw them coming, the soberness that had hung about her since Richard Meredith had left her a half hour earlier melted away, and she ran to meet them with a joyful little cry. It was hard that the two she loved best must have their happiness at the cost of someone else; but, after all, it was glorious that they *were* happy.

"We've been talking about you, Peg," Archibald said, when they three and Wiggles were comfortably seated on the doorstep—which was quite wide enough for four, if nobody minded crowding—and nobody did—"How would you like to go to boarding school this fall?"

Peg's face clouded.

"It wouldn't be far away, dear," the Smiling Lady interposed hastily, "and we'll be living in town after Thanksgiving; so you could spend all your Sundays and holidays with us; and then we'd all be up here together next summer."

"It's awfully sweet of you," Peg was polite but unconvinced. "I'm ever so much obliged; but I guess I'll stay right here and see to Mrs Benderby."

"Oh, I'll fix Mrs Benderby up all right," Archibald promised. "She can board with the Neals. They want a boarder and I'll give her an allowance that will make her comfortable. Then she won't have to work except when she feels just like it."

Pegeen abandoned Mrs Benderby to a life of idle luxury, but still thought she would stay in the Valley.

"You won't need me." Her voice was wistful as she made the admission. "Miss Moran will see to you—and I'm not jealous, not really, you know, only sort of lonesomey. There's sure to be somebody here in the Valley that'll need me and I feel as if I've just got to have somebody to see to."

"We'll always need you, Peg—always." Archibald's arm went round her and drew her close. "Even Miss Moran can't see to me so that I won't need you. And there are plenty of people here in the Valley who'd be the better for having you with them; but there's something you haven't realised yet, dear. The whole world needs seeing to; and there aren't many people like you who have a genius for doing it. You mustn't be wasted on two or three neighbours, here in the Valley, when outside, beyond the hills, there are thousands and thousands needing what you could give them. Don't you see, Peg? You've got to reach those poor unhappy thousands and help them. Other women are doing it—doing it wonderfully. Out in Chicago there's a woman who must have been a girl with a heart like yours; and now she's seeing to a whole city and to men and women and children out beyond that city, all over the world. She's only one of the many; and there's nothing they are doing that you can't do, if you'll work your way to it.

"That's what Nora and I want to help you to;

and school's the first step toward it. What do you say, Pegeen?"

The child's face was rapt, illumined. The great blue eyes were seeing visions.

"Oh, my stars!" she murmured longingly. "If I could—if I only could! Wouldn't it be wonderful?—better than Jizo. Of course I'll go to school, I'd love to."

A flash of recollection swept across the future-searching eyes.

"But I've got to have time enough in between to see to Mr Meredith," she stipulated. "He needs me."

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